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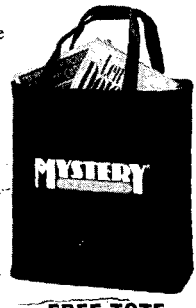

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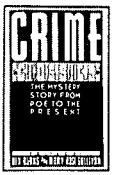

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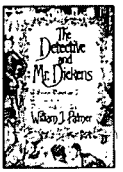

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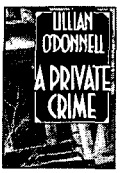

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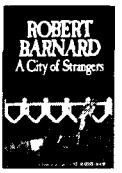

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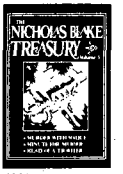

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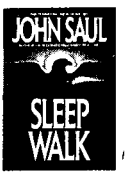

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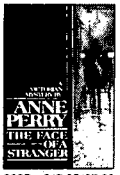

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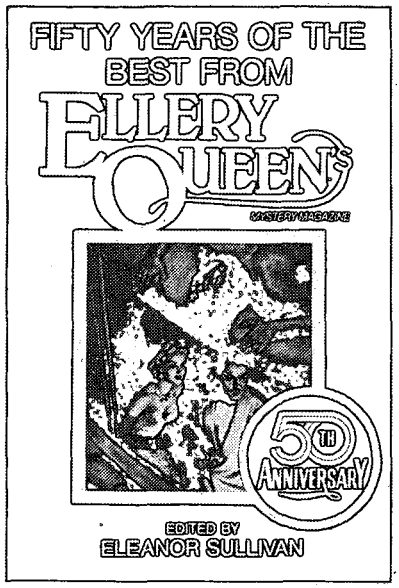

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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

We are very proud to announce that the Robert L. Fish Award for Best First Mystery Short Story of 1990 has gone to Jerry F. Skarky for "Willie's Story," which appeared in the June 1990 issue of AHMM. Congratulations to Mr. Skarky!

There are, as always at this time of year, other winners to announce as well. Edgar time has come again. Those of you who have been around the mystery scene for a while, or who haven't but read Mary Cannon's guest editorial in the July issue about the various awards, know what Edgars are. For those who don't, we can briefly say that they are named for Edgar Allan Poe and are ceramic busts of that gentleman given by the Mystery Writers of America each year to what they judge to be the best in a number of categories in mystery and crime writing. The annual banquet at which the awards are presented is held in New York in the spring; this year it occurred on April 25th at the Sheraton Centre Hotel in Manhattan.

The list of nominees and winners in all categories follows, with the winners in bold face.

BEST NOVEL OF 1990:

New Orleans Mourning **by Julie Smith (St. Martin's)**

Fade the Heat by Jay Brandon (Pocket)

Whiskey River by Loren D. Estleman (Bantam)

Bones and Silence by Reginald Hill (Delacorte)

Cathleen Jordan, Editor; **Elana Lore,** Managing Editor; **Terri Czeczko,** Art Director; **Ron Kuliner,** Associate Art Director; **Nancy Siwinski,** Junior Designer; **Carole Dixon,** Production Director; **Cynthia Manson,** Director of Marketing and Subsidiary Rights; **Constance Scarborough,** Manager, Contracts and Permissions; **Elizabeth Beatty,** Circulation Director; **Phyllis Jessen,** Circulation Planning Director; **Christian Dorbandt,** Newsstand Marketing and Promotion Manager; **Dennis Jones,** Newsstand Operations Manager; **Veena Raghavan,** Director, Special Projects; **Irene Bozoki,** Classified Advertising Director; **Barbara Zinkhen,** Classified Advertising Manager; **Judy Dorman,** Advertising Coordinator (New York: 212-557-9100).

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Deadfall in Berlin by R. D. Zimmerman (Donald I. Fine)

BEST FIRST NOVEL BY AN AMERICAN AUTHOR OF 1990:

***Postmortem* by Patricia Daniels Cornwell (Scribners)**

Passion Play by W. Edward Blain (Putnam)

Nobody Lives Forever by Edna Buchanan (Random House)

Crossing at Ivato by Rod MacLeish (Little, Brown)

Devil in a Blue Dress by Walter Mosley (Norton)

BEST PAPERBACK ORIGINAL OF 1990:

***The Man Who Would Be F. Scott Fitzgerald* by David Handler (Bantam)**

Comeback by L. L. Engler (Pocket)

Not a Creature Was Stirring by Jane Haddam (Bantam)

Dead in the Scrub by B. J. Oliphant (Fawcett)

SPQR by John Maddox Roberts (Avon)

BEST SHORT STORY OF 1990:

"Elvis Lives" by Lynne Barrett (EQMM, September)

"Answers to Soldier" by Lawrence Block (*Playboy*, June)

"Prisoners" by Ed Gorman (*New Crimes*, Carroll & Graf)

"A Poison That Leaves No Trace" by Sue Grafton (*Sisters in Crime 2*, Berkley)

"Challenge the Widow-Maker" by Clark Howard (EQMM, August)

BEST YOUNG ADULT MYSTERY NOVEL OF 1990:

***Mote* by Chap Reaver (Delacorte)**

Zachary by Ernest Pintoff (Eriksson)

Guilt Trip by Stephen Schwandt (Atheneum)

The Secret Keeper by Gloria Whelan (Knopf)

BEST JUVENILE OF 1990:

***Stonewords* by Pam Conrad (Harper & Row)**

The Midnight Horse by Sid Fleischman (Greenwillow)

The Tormentors by Lynn Hall (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich)

To Grandmother's House We Go by Willo Davis Roberts (Atheneum)

Ghost Cave by Barbara Steiner (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich)

BEST FACT CRIME OF 1990:

***In a Child's Name* by Peter Maas (Simon & Schuster)**

Goombata by John Cummings and Ernest Volkman (Little, Brown)

Beyond Reason by Ken Englade (St. Martin's)

A Death in White Bear Lake by Barry Siegel (Bantam)

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BEST CRITICAL/BIOGRAPHICAL STUDY OF 1990:

***Trouble Is Their Business: Private Eyes in Fiction, Film, and Television 1927-1988* by John Conquest (Garland)**

John Dickson Carr: A Critical Study by S. T. Joshi (Bowling Green Popular Press)

The Remarkable Case of Dorothy L. Sayers by Catherine Kenney (Kent State University Press)

Eric Ambler by Peter Lewis (Continuum)

Hillary Waugh's Guide to Mysteries and Mystery Writing by Hillary Waugh (Writer's Digest Books)

BEST MOTION PICTURE OF 1990:

***The Grifters*, screenplay by Donald E. Westlake based on the novel by Jim Thompson**

Presumed Innocent, screenplay by Frank Pierson and Alan J. Pakula based on the novel by Scott Turow

Goodfellas, screenplay by Nicholas Pileggi based on the book *Wiseguy* by Nicholas Pileggi

BEST TELEVISION FEATURE OF 1990:

***Killing in a Small Town*, teleplay by Cynthia Cidre based on the book *Evidence of Love* by John Bloom and Jim Arkinson (CBS)**

The Incident, teleplay by Michael and James Morrell (CBS)

Mathnet: Case of the Swami Scam, teleplay by Dave Connell and Jim Thurman (PBS)

Police Chiefs, teleplay by Susan and Alan Raymond (PBS)

Shake Hands Forever, teleplay adapted by Clive Exton from the work of Ruth Rendell (A&E)

BEST EPISODE IN A TELEVISION SERIES OF 1990:

"Goodnight, Dear Heart," written by Paul Brown *(Quantum Leap)*

"Happily Ever After," teleplay by David Black and Robert Stuart Nathan, story by Dick Wolf and David Black *(Law & Order)*

"Justice Swerved," written by David E. Kelley and Bruce Zabel *(LA Law)*

"Gabriel's Fire," teleplay by Jacqueline Zambrano and Coleman Luck, story by Coleman Luck and Jacqueline Zambrano and Dan Boyle *(Gabriel's Fire)*

This year's Grandmaster was Tony Hillerman. A special Edgar was awarded to *The Encyclopedia of World Crime* by Jay Robert Nash.

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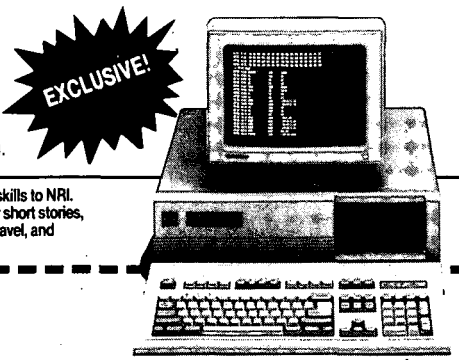

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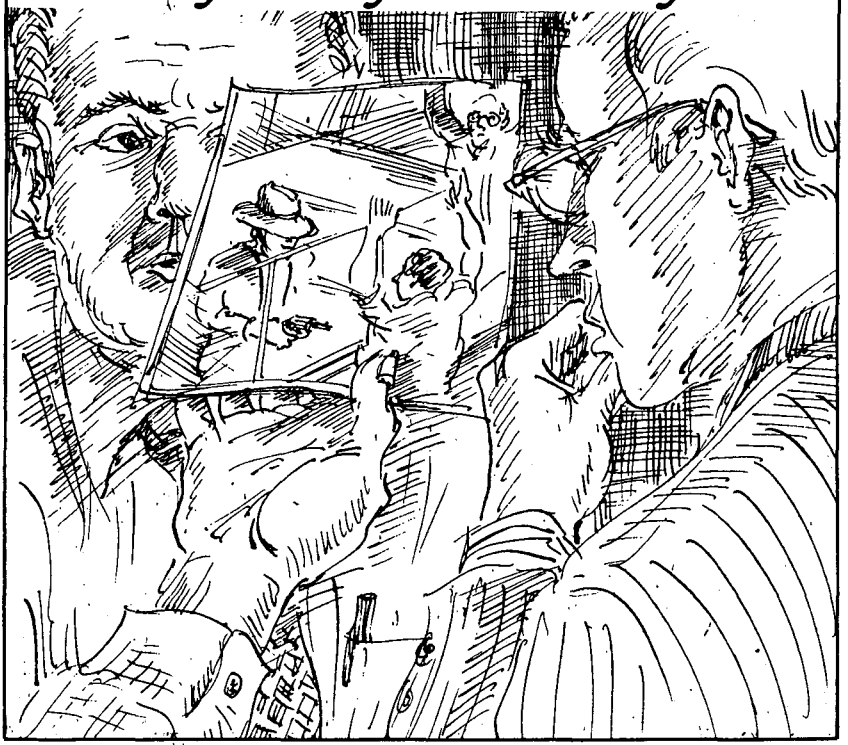
FICTION

Any Small Measure of Justice

by Terry Courtney



Late Friday afternoon and the FBI suite in the Federal Building was almost deserted. Only two agents were at their desks, facing each other across the aisle that divided the large main office. Both men were coatless, ties loose, collars open. They were busy organizing their notes prior to writing reports.

Agent Crowder was every casting director's ideal FBI agent. In his late thirties, blond and handsome, tall and athletic, he could

Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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have modeled anything from hairstyles to briefs.

Across the aisle Agent Panelli was no one's idea of an FBI agent. Early forties, with heavy Mediterranean features, a bull neck, and the body of a gorilla who did Nautilus three times a week, he looked like a man who at any moment might make you an offer you could not refuse. He and Crowder were best friends, so Crowder got away with calling him Bonzo in private.

Panelli stopped writing to fish a handkerchief from a hip pocket. "Crowder," he said, wiping his face and the inside of his collar, "is there a specific reason why this office would make a sauna envious?"

Crowder continued to write. "This is Phoenix, it is August, and the temperature is in triple digits."

"Forgive me if I seem dense," Panelli said, making a sweeping gesture that took in the room, "but this is a fairly new government structure. State of the art toilets, fast elevators, marble in the lobby. A person who is also a taxpayer has a right to expect air conditioning."

"There is air conditioning, but I think some Democrats installed it. It's being worked on."

Panelli went back to his notes. "It was also being worked on last week and the week before that. I realize that Washington is desperate to find odd jobs for Quayle to do, but this is ludicrous."

Crowder looked up, grinning, and pointed his pen at his friend. "Curb your tongue, Bonzo. Treason is definitely a big time felony, and you are flirting with same."

"What I'm flirting with is a transfer to the Virgin Islands."

"I've been there. It isn't true."

Both men concentrated on their work for several minutes, until the Special Agent in Charge came out of his office carrying an attache case, headed for that martini calling his name out there. He was an older, grayer, softer version of Crowder. His name was Dildoro. That everyone shortened it out of his hearing was anticlimactic.

He paused between the two agents. "You two catch the bank job?"

Both agents nodded in unison.

"How's it coming?"

Crowder leaned back, lacing his fingers behind his head. "It isn't. They got clean away."

"Nothing from the bank cameras?"

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"Take a look." Crowder located some photo enlargements among the clutter on his desk and handed them to his boss. "He kept his head down under that big Stetson hat. All you can see is his mouth and chin."

"Description?" Dildoro asked, shuffling through the photos.

"Zero. The girl is young, and this was her first robbery. She did it all by the bank's book, no doubt scared spitless, and her description of the man made him so ordinary I almost feel sorry for him." Crowder tilted his head and eyed Dildoro. "Come to think of it, she could have been describing you. Where were you at eleven o'clock this morning?"

Dildoro ignored Crowder. With time he had become immune. "I heard there was a shootout."

Panelli laughed. "Not quite. Holy ceiling, Batman."

"What happened?"

Crowder sighed. "As the robber was leaving, the girl signaled the guard. He shouted at the man to stop and started after him. The bad guy turned and fired a shot straight up, and the guard stopped in his tracks. The perpetrator turned and ran. As he hit the door, the guard matched his warning shot into the ceiling and headed after him again. The bad guy obviously had a partner waiting outside in a car, but for some reason, maybe the guard shooting, he ran off through the parking lot. The guard made the sidewalk, but hell, big mall, big parking lot, lots of cars and people. The robber disappeared. Just then the accomplice in the car must have realized what had happened. He burned rubber the hell out of there."

Dildoro dropped the photos on the desk and retrieved his case. "Nothing on the car?"

Panelli answered. "The guard tried for a license number, but he's seventy and wears trifocals. I don't think he could see his shoes if he looked straight down. He and two women the car almost ran over agreed it was light blue."

Dildoro headed for the door. "Well, do your best." He left.

Panelli pointed at Crowder. "Are you prepared to do your best?"

Crowder stood up and held a military salute. "I shall be relentless in my pursuit of evildoers." He walked away.

Panelli beamed. "My hero. Where are you going?"

"To the state of the art toilet," Crowder said over his shoulder, then stopped to turn back. "Bonzo, I'm expecting a call from the bank manager. If he calls back while I'm gone, put him on hold.

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I'll be right back. I only have to do number one."

Panelli rolled his eyes. "Do number one? How did you ever get in the Bureau?"

"They blindfolded me, and I thought I was joining a Moose lodge."

The branch bank manager called after Crowder returned. Panelli could only hear one side of the conversation, but it definitely held his thoughtful interest.

"Yes, this is Agent Crowder. . . . Hello. Thanks for calling. The Bureau would like your help. . . . Right. Only for the next two hours. It is now four o'clock, you close at six today, and you're closed tomorrow and Sunday. . . . Right. Okay, I've already spoken to most of the media people, but if any of them contact you before you close and want to know how much cash was taken in the robbery today, you tell them. . . . Yes, tell them nineteen thousand six hundred and sixty dollars. . . . I know that. Simply give them those numbers. Write it down. It's important. Nineteen thousand six sixty. . . . Of course. Monday we can correct it. . . . Trust the FBI on this one. . . . Thank you."

Crowder hung up and noticed Panelli staring at him. "What?"

Panelli folded his meaty hands on the desk, his gaze steady. "Crowder, can we be serious?"

Crowder nodded. "Sure."

"I can usually figure out what you're up to, no matter how convoluted your thinking is, which is sometimes very. But you always freelance. This time, well, I just don't understand. I don't understand what you're doing, but you asked that man to lie, not for you but for the Bureau. That makes it official, and that is bad. Dangerous. What's with you?"

Crowder snorted, stood up, and walked around his desk to plant his backside against the front edge. He jammed his hands into his pockets and studied the floor for a moment. "One way or another I've said this before, Bonzo, but I'll say it again. I despise, really despise, perpetrators. Bad guys. And it especially eats at my insides when they get away with whatever, even for a short while. It tears me up big time. I want justice to prevail in every case, which unfortunately doesn't happen. But that's the bottom line. Justice. And I'll do whatever it takes to achieve it in any degree. I'll take any small measure of justice I can get."

Panelli stood up, shaking his head. "I understand that, Crowder. I've always understood that. But you usually do it alone, not in the

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name of the Bureau. And what I really don't understand is the lie. The take from the bank was nine thousand six hundred and sixty dollars, not nineteen. Why?"

"You and I know it was nine six sixty. The people at the bank know it was nine six sixty. And I'm sure that fatherless slob who walked into the bank with larceny in his soul and a gun in his belt knows. But there is one person who doesn't know for sure."

An understanding grin slowly spread across Panelli's broad face.

Crowder returned his grin and shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe a little justice."

Panelli nodded and gave a twin thumbs-up. "You are a beautifully devious man, Crowder."

And on Sunday morning the first foursome off the tee at the Papago Park golf course found a man's body on the third green. The man had been shot once behind the left ear, execution style, and the medical examiner later said it appeared the man had been kneeling when shot. No identification was found on the body, but a fingerprint check revealed he was a convicted felon who had served time for armed robbery in prisons in both Illinois and Indiana. The Phoenix police, lacking a motive, took their usual convenient copout and called it a drug deal gone sour. They attached no significance to the Stetson hat found nearby.

Over breakfast in the coffee shop on Monday morning Panelli pointed to the story on the front page of the *Republic* and said to Crowder, "You think?"

"Yes, I think so. There was the hat."

"Lovely," Panelli murmured. "We'll have to follow it up."

"Justice," Crowder murmured back. "Of course we will."

Between bites Crowder said, "You know what you can always count on? There is no honor among thieves. A tired old cliche, but oh so true. You know it and I know it. But most important, thieves know it. They have to know it. It's about them."

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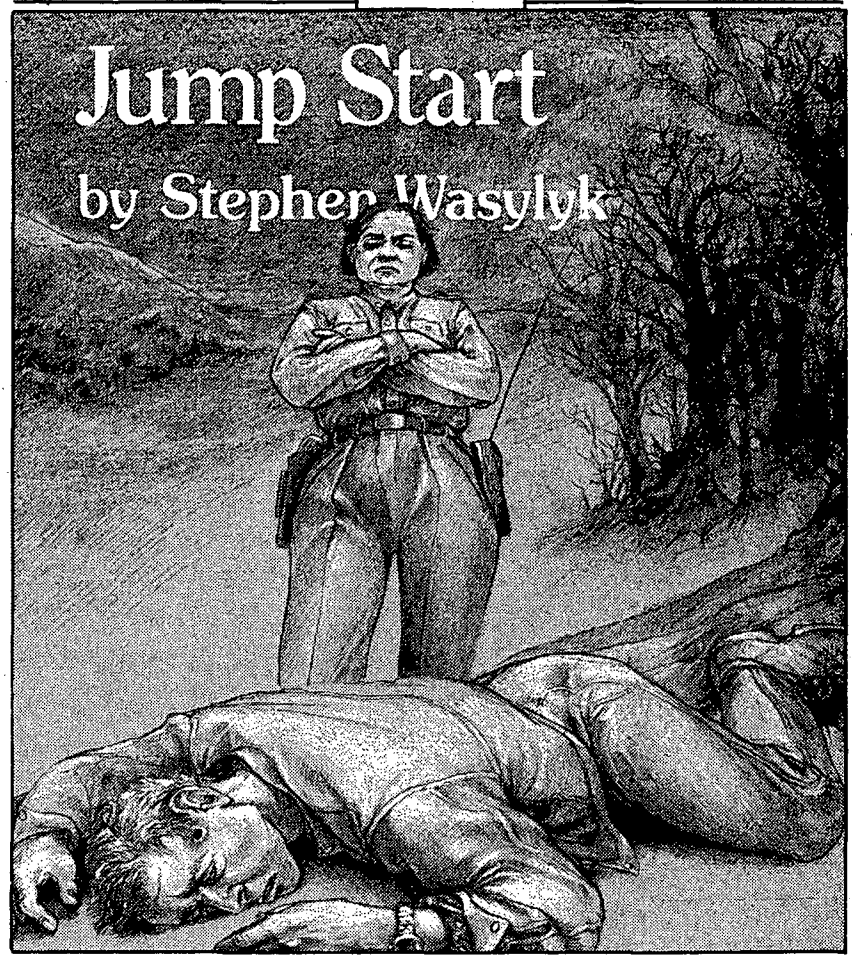
FICTION

Jump Start

by Stephen Wasylyk



The shout floated across the surface of the lake and curled around the boat like the early morning mist.

Retrieving his spinner slowly, Klauder threw a glance over his shoulder, saw the uniformed man on his rickety pier, and cursed softly. Down below, his lunch was eyeing that rotating flash of silver, but unless the fish struck within the next few seconds, it would be the fisherman, already hooked by the beckoning arm of that lean figure, who would be pulled from the water.

He finished the retrieve, cursed again, and carefully

Illustration by Judy Mitchell

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placed his rod in the boat. Lunch would come out of a can.

Peters helped him pull the battered rowboat onto the pier and turn it over.

"Hey," he said, "when she says get Klauder, do I have a choice? As far as I'm concerned, you could sit out there all day. Looks clear enough to me."

Klauder picked up his rod and tackle box and headed up the slope toward his cabin. "What looks clear enough to you?"

"He was killed by some damn fool hunter."

The other deputies all spouted information like beer pouring from the broken spigot on a keg. Peters used words as if there were no reason you shouldn't know exactly what he was referring to or what he meant.

Klauder placed his fishing gear on the kitchen table to be cleaned later, picked up his Blazer keys, and locked the door.

"Go ahead. I'll follow."

No point in extending the conversation. Peters had said enough. A man was dead who appeared to have been shot by a stray bullet from a hunter's rifle, but she'd seen or sensed something that had told her the obvious explanation wasn't the right one.

She wasn't very often wrong.

* * *

Peters led him along back roads he'd never driven before and would have little reason to ever drive again—a network of two-laned macadam that followed the folds of the Tuscaroras. They paralleled streams, crossed small stone bridges, clung to sides of steep hills, and ran along ridges; all hemmed in by trees growing close, leaves fallen from now-bare limbs swirling behind as the vehicles passed. Unmarked for mile after mile, with an occasional stop-signed intersection, the roads laced the county together, familiar only to the residents. A stranger would have no idea where they led, his only option to continue driving until he came across a rare route sign. It was rumored that a few city dwellers, accustomed to street signs and numbered houses, had finally reached civilization with the paint on their cars blistered from the new curses they'd invented.

They were skirting the steep bank of a small stream when Peters' signal flashed and he turned into a dirt access road that led upward to a farm, their journey ending when he pulled up at the end of a string of police vehicles and an ambulance parked behind a pickup and a gray sedan.

A photograph of the house

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and barn could have led off an article entitled "The Demise of the Small American Farm."

The buildings sat in a half-cup formed by a steep hill running from one side to beyond the barn, the hill packed closely with bare-limbed trees, only scattered splashes of fall color lingering.

The house might have been held together for a few more years by several generous coats of paint. The barn would require major reconstruction, if not demolition. The only building of recent vintage was a long, low, pre-fabbed corrugated poultry house at the end of a wire enclosure. A mass of chickens at the enclosure gate squawked, pushed, and shoved each other like teenage fans seeking a rock star's autograph.

Klauder felt he was looking at several breeds allowed to mingle, not a common practice as far as he knew but, city bred, he told himself his knowledge of chickens could be contained in a thimble with plenty of room left over for his expertise on stocks, bonds, classical music, women, and a dozen other subjects.

Sheriff Meg Boniface, hatless as usual, her dark brown, short-cut hair parted in the center, uniform militarily neat, stood with folded arms and watched him approach; a fifty-five-year-old monument to law and iron-fisted order implanted in the center of a small group of men some ten feet or so from a jacketed and jeaned figure sprawled on the ground.

She nodded a greeting. "Take a look, Klauder. He's been examined and photographed, but I didn't want him moved until you saw him."

Klauder looked back at the house, then at the chickens, still shifting for position near the gate.

"On his way to feed them," explained Meg.

Examining the ground, Klauder circled well away from the dead man. He was lying halfway between the house and the chickens in the enclosure, most of whom had quieted and were now pressed to the wire like nervous spectators.

He knelt beside him. The face was flat and square; jawbone wide, cheekbones high, nose squat and short. In the forty or so years the man appeared to have lived, all the creases had been engraved with a downward slant. He hadn't been a very goodlooking man, and from the creases, he was an unhappy one.

He'd pitched forward, right cheek buried in the dirt, left turned to the dull November sky. Whatever caused the small hole in his temple had killed him instantly. No blood

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beneath the head said it was still inside.

Klauder rose. To his left, a hundred yards of meadow sloped gently upward to the base of the hill, which had been thrust steeply skyward by internal pressure millions of years ago, layered rock occasionally breaking the monotony of solid forest. To his right, cleared land sloped downward, part of it sectioned off by a split-timber fence.

He glanced at the house. Two women sat on the wooden steps leading to the wide back porch. One was Annie, the slim, straight-haired deputy Meg had hired when he'd turned down the job.

"Just as well," Meg had said. "I'm tired of being a one-woman police force. Time I got some feminine help."

The other was a blonde with one of those ringleted, rats-nest hair styles invented by some delicate practitioner of the art determined to send comb and brush manufacturers into bankruptcy. The blonde touched heavily blue shadowed eyes with a handkerchief occasionally, but if tears were present, they weren't affecting her makeup.

"His wife see or hear anything?"

"Not a thing. He was walking toward the chickens and dropped. She had no idea why. Thought it was a heart attack until she saw the wound."

"She didn't move him?"

"Swears she didn't. Ran into the house and phoned. I was here first, so I know nothing was disturbed after that."

His eyes went back to the hill.

She noticed the glance. "Exactly why I called you."

Assuming the wife was correct, the bullet would have come from one of three places on the left: the meadow, the crest of the hill, or the other side. From the first two, the rifleman would have seen what he was aiming at. Only if it had come from the other side of the hill could it be considered a stray bullet.

The small hole and no exit wound indicated small caliber and limited range, and over the hill was a long way to travel—but small caliber cartridges were available with high muzzle velocities and energy ratings that could drive them a long distance. Theoretically it was possible that an unknowing hunter—this was the small game season—had fired upward and missed his target and everything else that would have prevented the bullet from looping over the hill like a tiny ballistic missile.

But a bullet fired from afar and a man walking from a house, both arriving at the

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same spot at exactly the same moment, and, furthermore, the bullet striking him in the one place it could kill him instantly? The odds against it could be calculated in light-years.

Still, in a world where anything could happen and usually did, fortunes had been made by betting against odds like those.

"You'd better call Majorski," he said. "You'll want the best man the state police have for the autopsy. We can't do much until the internal path of the bullet is established precisely, and assuming it isn't too distorted to identify, a forensic ballistics expert will have to tell us what it is, what fired it, and how far it could have traveled."

She nodded. "Another reason I called you. If I ask him to do it, he'll ask why. If he knows you want it, he'll ask when."

He smiled. "Meg, the state police think far more of you than that."

"Maybe, but Majorski thinks far more of a former detective-lieutenant from Philadelphia when it comes to something like this than he does of a fat old broad. Can't say I blame him."

"Have Peters stake the position of the body out before you move him. We'll need it to work from when we get that angle of penetration. In the meantime, there's no reason why a couple of men can't scour the meadow and the crest of the hill for signs, and look into who among the hunting fraternity might have been on the other side of the hill this morning."

She gave Peters and the others their instructions and went along with him to his Blazer. He walked. She marched.

The widow glanced at him without interest as he passed. The tangled hair was not only the color of straw but also the texture. Her face appeared to be made of high gloss plastic with pencilled in eyebrows; one of those women who had convinced herself she'd forever remain twenty-five. Her lush body threatened the seams of the jeans and bulged the low-cut flowered blouse beneath her jacket so spectacularly it would have instantly frozen all male arms lifting beer glasses in any bar she entered.

Annie, her somewhere-between-blonde-and-brown hair burnished, braided, and wound around her head, dropped the lid of one expressive blue eye in a wink. Lips too thin, nose too large, but the freshness of youth working for her, thin Annie was far more attractive, but the widow wouldn't have admitted that.

"Incidentally, what was his name?"

"Shepp. Weldon Shepp."

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Klauder paused at the vehicle door. Those light-year odds against a stray bullet had just doubled.

In his two years there, he hadn't paid much attention to what went on as far as the sheriff's office was concerned. He'd had enough of those things when he was on the force, and the only difference between crime here and in Philadelphia was frequency and volume. But he'd heard about Weldon Shepp. Everyone in the county had heard about Weldon Shepp.

Meg had arrested the substitute high school teacher on molestation charges brought by the parents of two ten-year-old girls, who had been eager to see him prosecuted, but the girls later said they'd made a mistake. Rumor had it that the parents had backed off when they realized what the publicity of a trial might do to the girls. Whatever the reason, the charges had been withdrawn and Shepp never brought to trial.

Since the girls said they'd made a mistake, the school board couldn't fire him as a substitute teacher without facing a lawsuit, but in an area where jobs were scarce, particularly teaching ones, Shepp had gone from a steady income to an intermittent one.

Unfortunately, the entire county had already found him guilty. It appeared now that a self-appointed executioner might have carried out what many would consider summary justice.

Klauder looked back at the henhouse. "He and his wife were lucky they had those chickens and eggs to eat."

"He'll never finish it now."

Klauder sometimes thought that Peters learned his conversational skills from her, the difference being that Peters rambled. What she said held a significance that had to be interpreted.

Nothing in her face gave him a hint. It seldom did. He waited.

She jerked a thumb back over her shoulder. "Wasn't supposed to be a backyard hobby."

He had his clue. "The henhouse and the chickens?"

"Teaching was a fill-in job. He was an agronomist or something. Specialized in poultry. He'd been promised a grant to set up a study. You know, controlled feeding trying something new under controlled conditions. Those chickens were supposed to be segregated and confined. I suppose he said to hell with it and let them run loose after they told him to forget it."

"Controlled feeding? To improve the breed?"

"And egg production."

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"And he lost the grant."

"Those knotheads wouldn't listen to me."

That told him all he needed to know about Weldon Shepp.

"The girls lied about being molested?"

"No. They lied about Shepp. Said they were too frightened to name the right man. One of the mothers had realized something had happened to her daughter and was smart enough to handle it so well the girl told her. She also told her that it had happened to her friend. When the girls were pressed to name the man, they came up with Weldon Shepp. Know why? They'd been in his class that day, and his was the first name that popped into mind. Their story should have fallen apart the minute I checked it out, but you know how it goes sometimes. Everything seemed to fit. The district attorney agreed. I brought Shepp in, but something about the timing didn't sit well. When I caught up to it, they admitted Shepp wasn't the man but wouldn't tell us who he really was. Still won't, and the psychiatrist says not to press it. They're handling a big load as it is."

"I might have been able to help."

"Didn't think I needed help from anyone. One of the biggest mistakes of my life."

She leaned against the fender of the Blazer and was looking back toward the house, her face giving no indication of what she was feeling.

Anger, thought Klauder. At herself. And more. A deep hurt that her failure had cost a man his reputation and allowed a child molester to remain free. She'd remain torn up inside until it was settled.

"We all make mistakes."

She smiled wryly. "I knew if I waited long enough, I'd hear you say something stupid. I'll be in touch when the report comes in from the staties. If the molesting and this tie together—"

"In a county full of rifles and righteous indignation, I'd be surprised if they didn't, one way or another. Say hello to Majorski."

Her voice was smug. "Say hello to your new neighbor."

"I could have lived a full life without knowing I had one."

The cabins were fifteen miles from town. He was a hundred yards away. The smugness was a subtle reminder that little went on in the county she didn't know about.

"Goodlooking woman, just about the right age for you. Natalie Something. Mizz, if you please. Lady lawyer. She rented the Boyntons' cabin while they're in Florida for the winter. Needs solitude to write

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a book. Uh-huh. More likely some guy took off on her."

"She'll get plenty of solitude after the snow comes."

"What she'll get is loneliness. A little neighborliness could help."

"I'm a simple woodcarver and part-time detective, not a lady's home companion."

"What you are is a damned misogynist."

He climbed in and grinned at her. "Impossible. I love *you*, don't I?"

He should have paid more attention to the roads on the way in. He was lost within ten minutes and let the Blazer follow its nose like a horse finding its way to the stable.

She'd showed up at the cabin one morning. "Okay, so you've had enough of everyday police work, Klauder." She clapped him on the shoulder as though conferring a knighthood, a heavy-handed dubbing he'd felt for an hour afterward. "You're now a consultant. The county commissioners jumped at the chance to use a real live honest-to-God, taxpayer-trained homicide detective when the occasion calls for one. You get per diem and expenses, if any. Of course, I didn't mention that you'd taken early retirement because you had principles. Politicians consider those a curse. So you can carve your decoys until I need you. Hell, the crooks shouldn't be the only ones to make something out of crime, even if your end will only be a little extra beer money." She grinned. "Domestic brands, of course."

She'd known he'd help for nothing. It was her way of saying she appreciated his time, and she'd given the commissioners little choice. She knew of more skeletons tucked away in more closets than the curator of the largest anthropological museum in the world.

In any job there are things you like and things you don't. The ones he didn't finally tipped the scale, but he'd never deny he missed the ones he did, among them fitting the pieces of a puzzle until he had an answer. And possibly even more than the puzzle itself, the pieces that went into it—from turning up hard physical evidence to noticing a betraying flicker of an eyelid, an unconvincing note in a voice, an emotion suddenly revealed.

"Aside from the victims' being dead, no two are the same," a detective had once told him.

Perhaps that was it. Variety was the spice of life.

The road deposited him on the one that encircled the random fingers of the lake. Across the water his cabin eventually appeared through breaks in the trees and, down from it, the one owned by the Boyntons and

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now rented by Natalie Something, who was about the right age for him.

The Boyntons had told him they were going but hadn't mentioned the winter rental. Probably left it in the hands of a real estate agent.

The first winter he'd been there, Boynton, agile as he was at seventy, had slipped on the ice and injured his back. Not strong enough to move him and the phone lines being down, his wife had negotiated the snow between the cabins to ask for help. He'd looked in on them occasionally after that, and Mrs. Boynton appeared on his doorstep periodically with an enormous jar of homemade soup, homebaked bread, or something else so good it would have driven Betty Crocker out of the kitchen in a jealous snit.

The man likes his privacy, Grace.

But he doesn't eat properly, Charlie.

Klauder grinned. Could lady lawyers make soup?

He caught a glimpse of a low-slung sports car in the driveway as he passed. She'd better hope for a mild winter if she expected to get around very much. The ploughs came through fairly quickly, but there was more to winter driving than that, which was why many of the year-round residents owned at least one four-wheel-drive vehicle.

Lunch was corned beef hash out of a can, microwaved hot, topped by a couple of fried eggs, and coffee.

But he doesn't eat properly, Charlie.

The Grace Boyntons of the world always know.

What had once been the living room of the cabin was now his workshop, his bench overlooking the lake and his rickety pier with the battered, upside-down rowboat. The magnificent view not only changed with the seasons but daily, the lake and the forest on the far shore always presenting different perspectives and chromatics like a scene constantly revised by an artist hoping someday to get it right.

The decoys he carved were sold by a friend named Halley through a sportsmen's catalogue. The money wasn't as important as working with his hands; the framed photograph of his dead wife before him, his mind free to review morosely the streets and alleys of life that had brought him here.

There was now something that Meg hadn't seen. He'd set aside a group of basswood blocks that had been sent by the mill as a bonus along with the cedar he usually used. A month ago, without knowing

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why, he'd started carving into one idly, his strokes made up as he went along, until he realized he was working on an image in his mind. A mallard, head up and wings spread, was emerging from the block of wood as though released by the tools. He'd finished it and sent it to Halley, the result an immediate phone call.

"Forget the decoys," said Halley. "I have plenty of suppliers for those. Send me more mallards. I'll pay five times what I pay for your decoys. You've turned into a damned artist, Klauder."

He was now starting on his fourth.

It was almost finished three days later when Meg called.

"I have the results." Her voice grew hollow as though she had cupped a hand around the mouthpiece. "Brought personally by a nut wearing funny clothes. How do these guys pass the civil service exam, Klauder?"

The nut was a young man named Pearson, a technician in the forensic lab. Meg's funny clothes were nothing more than the latest style, draped loosely and appearing two sizes too large. Together with a flat-topped, cone-shaped haircut that looked like the first effort of a barber school apprentice and a large pair of shell-rimmed spectacles, he looked like the skinny, nerdy young bank teller in an old movie who was hopelessly in love with the bank president's sexy secretary.

"I was intrigued by this," he said. "Except for the lack of powder burns, without any knowledge of the circumstances, I would have immediately guessed this was a contract killing by a professional, some of whom seem to have gone into using .22 caliber pistols."

"We suspected something small," said Klauder.

"You were right. I had a manufacturer's representative check my work. Your man was killed by a .22 bullet, approximately forty grains—

We could have guessed that, thought Klauder.

"—so there are a variety of cartridges that could have fired it—"

Which anyone in this business would already know.

"—It was, however, a head shot, which would require extreme accuracy at a distance—"

The man was a fountain of information.

"—so the representative and I agreed to take the conservative view of the bullet expansion and depth of penetration."

"A very unique approach," said Meg.

"We have concluded that, all

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factors considered, he was killed from approximately twenty-five yards, which would take only moderate skill."

He sounded very pleased with himself.

Klauder looked at Meg. "Approximately twenty-five yards."

"How much margin for error in the distance?" she asked.

"Does twenty-five yards present a problem?"

"It might."

"Then I suggest we check it out at the site. The angles of entry should tell us more. Since my equipment is in my car, you lead and I'll follow." He smiled. "May I say I'm pleased with your reaction? I sometimes have to spend time convincing people that a .22 can kill just as effectively as a heavier weapon. The size of the hole is immaterial. Its placement is. Indeed, a person can be killed with a needle. Used in the right place, of course."

"Of course," said Klauder. For all he knew, Pearson might have tried it just to be sure. He knew a man in love with his work when he saw one.

As he walked out, Meg pulled a badge from her desk drawer and handed it to Klauder.

"Put this on."

It was unusually heavy, oval shaped, the words "Special Deputy" curved above and below a *C* in the center where the others were numbered.

Klauder grinned. "Just what I've always wanted. My very own badge. But why do I need it?"

"Damned if I'll stand here listening to someone call you Mr. Klauder as if we're equal in rank. I'm the boss when we're working together."

"Yes, ma'am," said Klauder.

She was, he thought, good for a surprise a minute.

At the Shepp farm, Pearson placed a surveyor's transit on the spot indicated by the stakes as he mumbled. "Modified for my purposes, of course. Which way was he facing? That way? Good."

He threw smiles at them as he adjusted the instrument like a magician setting up a mind-boggling piece of legerdemain, sans the prancing assistance of the usual scantily clad, voluptuous assistant.

"Are we supposed to applaud?" asked Meg.

"Give him credit," said Klauder. "Even if he does wear funny clothes. Good idea, that transit. He can line up both the horizontal and vertical angles exactly."

Pearson peered through the transit, stepped back and frowned, looking up at the hill, his face showing confusion. His transit was set at a flat angle. The bullet couldn't have been fired downward.

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"I see what you mean about the distance. I didn't know about the meadow. No place of concealment at all to the man's left. He would have seen anyone pointing a rifle at him."

"Unless he was blind," said Meg. "Which he wasn't."

"Or the killer was slightly behind him and he turned his head toward him at the last moment," said Klauder. He peered through the transit, swung it around slowly, and stepped back to wave Pearson to the eyepiece.

Pearson looked through, lifted his head, and smiled. "I'd buy that, I think. It matches the angle of penetration."

"What in the hell are you guys talking about?" asked Meg.

"A tree," said Klauder. "The only concealment anywhere near close enough. All Shepp would have to do was turn his head slightly just as the trigger was pulled to throw us off."

Pearson began folding his transit. "Rather obvious, I think. Well, you no longer need me. If I were you, I'd look around for something like a bolt action, single shot rifle. Some are quite accurate at eighty yards."

"Thank you," Meg said. "If you'd care to give me a dollar for every one in the county, I'll hire a male companion and retire to Acapulco."

He shrugged. "You can also check to see who purchased that type of ammunition recently."

"This, Mr. Pearson, is small game season. Like to guess how many boxes of .22 shells were sold during the last week or so?"

He ignored the ominous note in her voice.

"Oh. You do know your territory, don't you? Well, it's been a pleasure working with you." He shook her hand and then Klauder's. "And you, Mr. Klauder."

"Deputy Klauder. She's the boss."

Klauder smiled at the frost in her glance.

Pearson stowed his transit in his trunk and returned with an envelope.

"You'll find all your information in here, sheriff."

As his car disappeared down the road, she said, "If the world is lucky he'll get lost and drive around until spring." She tapped Klauder's arm. "And you. You can be somewhat of a wise-ass yourself. I gave you that badge to protect you if you ever get into trouble, to shift responsibility to me. Easy to satisfy, wasn't he?"

He was gradually becoming accustomed to her conversation flopping around like a fish in the bottom of his boat.

"I don't think so, ordinarily.

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I think he's a bulldog in the lab. That's why he called in a manufacturer's rep to doublecheck him. But he's young and he was sandbagged by what is generally known these days as the learning process. He came down here in his designer suit all set to impress the country folk with his expertise. What sheriff needs a lecture on .22's and that they can kill? Had it all worked out in his mind. He'd set up his transit and lead you to the precise spot where the gunman lurked. You'd find an ejected shell with a beautiful fingerprint and a signed note from the killer saying, 'Come and get me,' and he'd say, 'This is how the experts do it, sheriff.' But he'd leaped to the conclusion that the shot had been fired from cover. Most are. When the transit pointed to an open field, it left him at a loss. So when I showed him the tree, he was very happy to take off before he embarrassed himself further, even though the tree is a good eighty yards away. He'll know better next time. Sometimes we're so sure we have an answer that, when it doesn't work, our brain stalls out and can come up with nothing else."

"Like mine did with Shepp and the two girls," she said softly.

"Maybe. Pearson's a lousy detective, but he's too good a technician to be wrong about the distance. How many people do you know who can pull off a head shot at eighty yards with a .22? Both cars are in the driveway, so Mrs. Shepp must be home. We'd better talk to her again."

Meg was on his left. They'd taken no more than two steps when she pushed him hard; something slammed into his chest and drove him to his knees and left him paralyzed and unable to breathe. Wondering what the hell had happened, he saw her racing toward the house with remarkable grace and speed before one lung at least seemed to process enough oxygen to set his brain working again and he remembered the sharp *crack* mixed in with it all and realized that the badge beneath the hand clutching his chest was no longer smooth because it had stopped a bullet.

She came out of the house with a rifle in one hand, the other twisted in the collar of Mrs. Shepp's already too-tight silk blouse, straining the buttons and threatening to expose her remarkable chest measurements for all to see, reminding Klauder of a mother dragging a misbehaving child home while hissing in that deadly way that mothers have: "*Now* you're going to get it!"

* * *

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He sat in a corner of the office, scanning through the file on the two girls who had been molested and listening to tapes of the interviews. The *I'll-be-damned* and *you're-lucky-it-was-only-a-.22* comments by those who examined the bent badge had been exhausted, along with the customary so-called humor by the department's stand-up comedians, such as he was the type who could fall into an outhouse and come up covered with gold, or he ought to buy a block of lottery tickets if not head for the Atlantic City casinos, since no one that lucky could possibly lose.

Wondering how long it would be before he could breathe without his chest hurting, he turned the pages and looked up occasionally to watch Meg Boniface, the district attorney, Mrs. Shepp, and her lawyer closeted in her cubbyhole with a tape recorder.

It was late afternoon before the little party broke up, the district attorney walking out clutching the recorder as though it contained the key to the next election, Mrs. Shepp's attorney with a resigned look on his face, Mrs. Shepp bound for the women's wing of the county prison in the custody of Annie and Peters, and Meg remaining to beckon at Klauder.

He closed the door.

"How's the chest?"

"I'll live. Since she must have been drawing a bead on my heart, you're now responsible for me for the rest of your life."

"Klauder," she said, "I don't even eat Chinese food. You're not sticking me with that one."

"You did say the badge was to protect me. It sure as hell did. I didn't see her at all."

"She poked the rifle barrel out of the kitchen window. Which is how she shot him. I suppose that when she saw us out there, she knew it was over. But you already knew, didn't you?"

"The minute Pearson said he'd been shot from twenty-five yards or less. The only cover that close was the chickens and the house. It was safe to say the chickens hadn't done it. She must have called to him to make him turn his head so it would appear the shot was fired elsewhere."

"She wouldn't say, but I'm sure she did. She isn't so stupid she wouldn't know that if we'd found a hole in the back of his head, we'd go right to the house. Great wife, that woman. Didn't believe her husband when he said he was innocent. Claims she shot him because of those girls. Made her feel dirty, couldn't stand the sight of him, he'd humiliated her. Used every cliche in the book to set up a

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defense. Actually, we all knew she'd seen a chance to get rid of him while making it look as though a vigilante type had taken the law into his own hands, but she'll probably impress the hell out of a jury. Come across anything in the file?"

He hesitated. "You won't like what I have to say."

"In other words, old Meg screwed up. So I'll add it to my long list. Speak up, Klauder."

Square your shoulders, lift your head, and face the world, and to hell with what went on inside—but she'd rather know than not know.

"Let's call the girls Number One and Number Two. They left the school together, an unnamed man lured them into his car by offering them a ride home, drove somewhere, and did things their mothers warned they should never allow anyone to do. When he let them out, they ran to the home of Number One. She went in, while Number Two continued home. Number Two's mother noticed she was upset and, as you said, handled it just right, so that the girl told her what happened. Her parents brought the girl to you. After listening to her, you sent Annie for Number One. You sat them down together and told Number One what her friend had said. I get the impression that Number One was a great deal more reluctant to talk than Number Two."

She nodded. "Different type of girl, different type of parents, different type of family situation. Not unusual at all."

"Number One finally named Weldon Shepp. The other agreed. The parents of Number Two insisted on bringing charges. The parents of Number One said they really didn't want that kind of trouble, that they'd handle it themselves. When you found Shepp had been in a hardware store three miles in the other direction at the time the incident had taken place, you asked the girls who the man really was. They couldn't tell, said Number One, because he threatened to kill them both. Number Two agreed again. That was when the parents of Number One backed away and said enough damage had been done, and the parents of Number Two went along."

Her face was impassive. "Get to the point, Klauder. What I want to know is where I screwed up."

"You talked to them together, something you'd never do with adults, and it sounded to me as though the kids were batting the information back and forth like a volleyball across a net. If you'd interviewed them separately, nei-

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ther would have known what the other was saying, and their stories would have broken down right there. You can't go back now because the psychiatrist won't let you near them, and I agree with that."

She placed her elbows on her desk and laced her fingers tightly as if she wanted to keep them from trembling. "Now that's a real beauty, Klauder. Stupid enough to make me almost want to resign."

"You were being nice. You knew how scared that little girl would be, questioned by adults about something she didn't want to talk about. You thought that being with her friend would help. It was what any decent person would do, so stop kicking yourself because you'll stall out your brain again. Remember that the man is still out there."

She turned white with anger, her voice a whisper. "Don't you think I know that?"

He shifted in the chair, looking for a more comfortable position. X-rays said nothing was broken. The doctor had admired the bruise, the first he'd ever seen in the shape of a badge.

The pain irritated him. "Dammit, put your mind in gear, Meg! People often tell you what you want to know even though they don't actually come out with it. I've never met the two girls, but I get the impression that Number One is the dominant one. She came up with the answers. Number Two merely went along. I started to wonder why she was so reluctant to name the man and why the other one went along with her so readily. Why should she lie about Shepp, and follow that with another evasion about an unnamed man threatening to kill them both?

"They're only little girls, Klauder."

"I know. Confused. Frightened. But does that mean that Number One might not have made up these things to protect someone close to her, or that Number Two might not have simply been loyal to her best friend?"

Meg stared at him. "Who?"

"How many adult males are that close to a ten-year-old girl? And two bright kids like that wouldn't get into a strange man's car. They'd have to know him. He does something that Number One didn't protest because she'd grown up with it, but was a big no-no to Number Two, who came from an entirely different type of family. It upsets her. She tells her mother, but she's confused. She knows what happened was wrong, but she doesn't want to say anything bad about—"

"Her best friend's father," Meg whispered.

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Klauder nodded. "Remember, Number One didn't want to say anything at all, but finally names Weldon Shepp. Number Two follows her lead, just as she does when Number One says the man threatened to kill them."

He rose, winced, and headed for the door.

"Listen to the tapes with your eyes closed, and see if you come up with another reason why Number Two's father sounds ready to take someone apart, but Number One's merely sounds nervous. Have a little talk with him. If I'm right, you'll know in thirty seconds."

She slapped her forehead. "My brain didn't stall out, Klauder. It went absolutely dead."

"Happens to us all."

He sensed her anger refocusing itself and building. She recognized only two types of malefactors—those who merely broke the laws of men and those who went beyond to wallow in the slime pits of evil. The former she accepted, but upon the latter, when she didn't have enough evidence to haul them in, she vented a blood-chilling wrath that recognized no sociologically-nurtured, wrist-slapping tolerance and would have rendered the Supreme Court speechless. She'd taken an oath to protect the innocent, and in this instance, the innocent were the two girls. He could see it written on her face. By God, not in *her* county, evidence or no evidence.

He winced every time he turned the wheel as he drove home, flakes from what appeared to be the season's first real snowstorm slanting through his headlight beams.

The Boynton cabin went by, windows yellow through the trees. He stepped on the brake and sat fingering the bent badge. Stalling out could be applied to life, too. Often it didn't need much to get it going again, but after two years in the land of the emotionally dead, it required a jump start —like hearing the whisper of the sharp blade of a scythe wielded by a cackling, white-robed, bony old man.

Long past time to get with the world again, Klauder.

He backed up and turned into Natalie Something's driveway.

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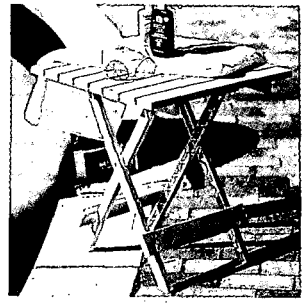

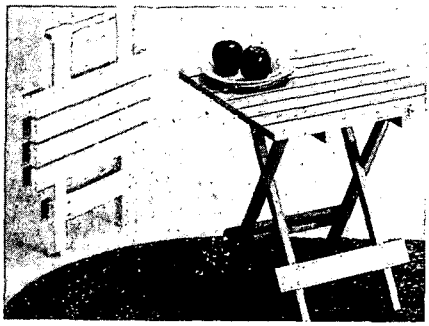

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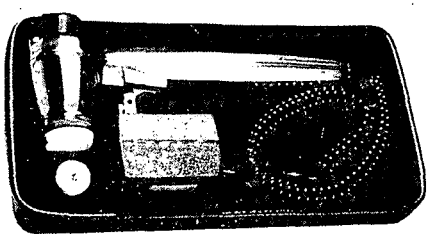

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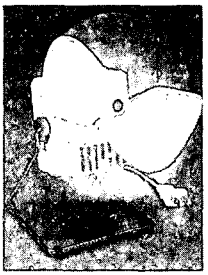

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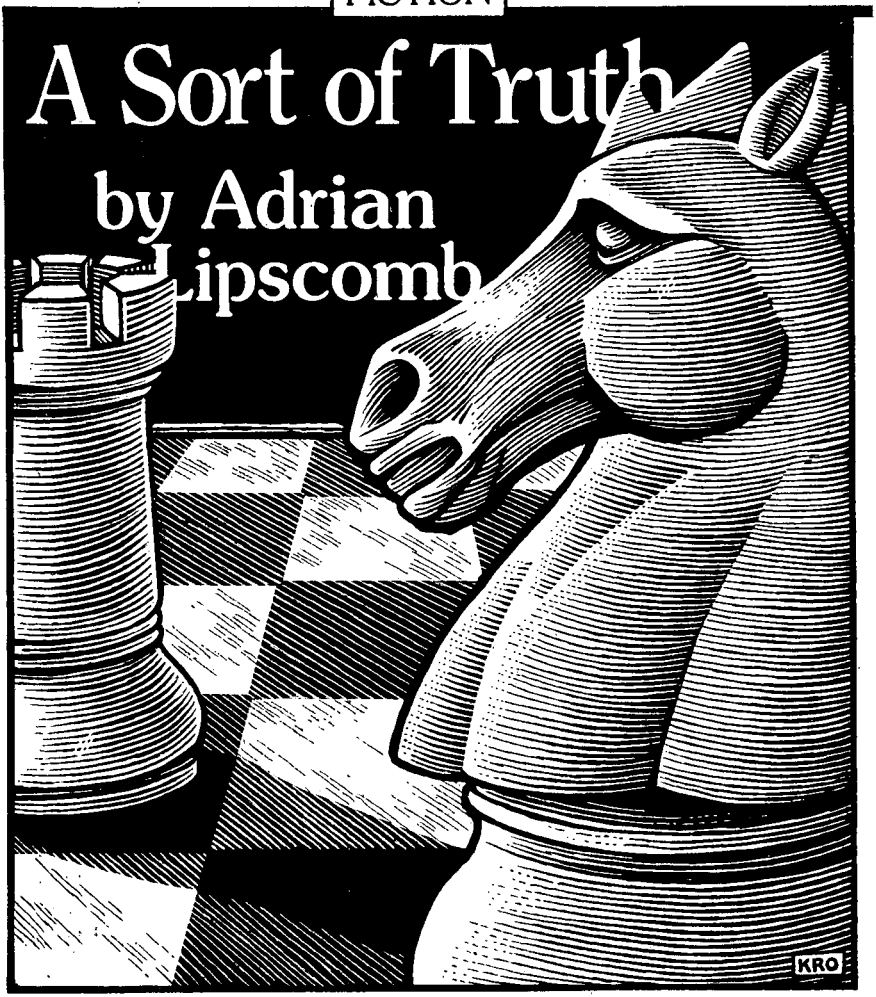
FICTION

A Sort of Truth

by Adrian Lipscomb



A storm raged on the mountain, and sheets of rain buffeted the car as it negotiated the road that snaked down to the Araluen Valley. Commander Stewart Rawson gripped the steering wheel and leaned forward to squint past the thrashing windscreen wipers at the road beyond. He was no stranger to wind and rain, but it was an effort nevertheless, and he pursed his lips in concentra-

Illustration by Dan Krovatin

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tion. He was not happy. The two hour drive from Canberra, Australia's "bush" capital, had been arduous, and he did not relish the task he had to undertake in this secluded place.

"Talk to Dudley, that's all," the director had said. "Be nice to him. Flatter him. Get him talking about himself. But above all, keep your wits about you, and observe the man. Your objective is to gauge whether or not he was likely to sell out. That's all." Gauge the man! That was the worst of the services. You could be asked oh-so-nicely to do something that was absolutely distasteful and almost impossible, but the order was implicit in the request. Do it. Rawson's knuckles whitened on the steering wheel as he remembered.

The director had smiled at him. "Dudley had few friends here at DIO. He was not a particularly likeable man, as I recall. You sometimes played checkers with him, didn't you, Stew?"

"Chess, actually, sir. He's quite a devotee. He collects chess sets as a hobby."

"Of course. Chess. I've never understood board games, I'm afraid. But," he continued, "you were one of the very few people here who had something approaching a friendly relationship with him. He was a bit of a hermit, was old Dudley, locking himself away in his office and rarely even talking to anyone."

"He was a very intelligent man, sir."

"Yes." The director had nodded. "Intelligent, but . . . odd. So odd, in fact, that we consider that this job calls for someone with a certain rapport with the man. A 'friend,' so to speak. Definitely not the thing for ASIO.* None of their people know him well enough. Although," he added with transparent honesty, "they do want to brief you on the best way to approach him."

"I spoke to them this morning, sir."

"Ah, good. Good. If we are to get anywhere with a man like Dudley, our best hope is with someone like you," he repeated. "Someone he . . . er . . . knows."

He was going to say "trusts," thought Rawson as he swung into another windswept bend. "Someone he trusts." Not an appropriate word in that environment. Trust is a quality of fools when one lives in a world where security is paramount. No one in DIO trusted anyone else. A sardonic smile flitted across Rawson's mouth, but he

**ASIO: The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, Australia's internal security body, similar to America's FBI.*

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instinctively nodded an affirmation to the beating windscreen wipers as though to the director himself.

It was true that Dr. Nigel Dudley was a friend of Rawson's, which was in itself strange. The Australian Defence Intelligence Organisation, commonly known by its abbreviation DIO, was a curious and frequently uneasy mixture of civilian and service personnel, and it was rare that friendships crossed that boundary. Moreover, it was particularly unusual that an intense young naval commander like Rawson should strike up a friendship with an eccentric boffin like Dudley. Dudley was an academic. One of those ageless and naive scholars who find their niche in the back rooms of the diplomatic corps or the intelligence services. Thirty-seven years of age, single, fluent in Bahasa Indonesian, and interested in little apart from strategic analysis and his specialty, Indonesian politics, Dudley was quintessentially dull.

On the other hand, Rawson was a seagoing officer in the Royal Australian Navy, a principal warfare officer who had been seconded to the DIO for a three year tour of duty. He was a man used to the hierarchy of service life and the excitement and prestige of life aboard ship. He was a trained leader with an innate and unquestioning belief in the military ethos. Consequently, he was, in reality, just as insular as Dudley, but in a very different way. They had never been exactly "mates," but somehow they had clicked. They both had an instinct, and a love, for what they thought of as strategy. Gamesmanship was perhaps a better word for it. Gamesmanship was often mistaken for true strategic thinking in the Australian Defence Department. It was more predictable, more workable, more . . . military because it disregarded entirely the human element. It was a binary system—things were either on or off, yes or no, black or white. There were no shades of grey caused by unpredictable humanity. The officer and the academic both liked to pit their minds against a rational and logical adversary, and in so doing they automatically excluded all real-life situations. Both enjoyed computers, war gaming . . . and chess. There was a mutual respect between them. They both "understood."

The road straightened out as it reached the valley floor, and Rawson leaned back a little in the seat of his car.

"I'm sure the security officer has briefed you fully on the background to the affair, but it

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never hurts to go over the facts one more time." The director had suddenly swung his chair to face him. "Does it now?"

"Of course not, sir."

"Right. So what do we know?" The director paused to gather his thoughts. "Dudley was a respected senior analyst on the Indonesia desk in the Intelligence Estimates Branch . . . and he resigned unexpectedly three months ago in what could be considered suspicious circumstances. No explanation given other than 'personal reasons,'" Rawson nodded in agreement.

"Although highly intelligent, Dudley was not an administrator. Consequently, his career path was limited . . . as, of course, are the career paths of most civilian intelligence analysts. As you know, the intelligence services offer little scope for the ambitious, and this in itself could have sparked his resignation. But when we take into account three other factors surrounding his departure, alarm bells start to sound. First, the simultaneous deactivation of one of our best ASIS* agents in Jakarta—Adder, on whose secret intelligence many of Dudley's analyses were based. Certainly, Dudley was not aware of the identity of Adder, but the type and content of the information he was receiving were highly indicative of where Adder worked. That was the reason for all the caveats and classifications on Adder's material . . . TOP SECRET AUSTEO SENSITIVE SOURCE. With access to this intelligence, in either raw *or* digested form, BAKIN* would have little difficulty inferring the identity of its source."

"Of course," Rawson interrupted, "we cannot be sure that any of the material *was* compromised. Adder could have dried up as a result of a variety of factors completely unrelated to the work Nigel was undertaking."

"That's true. But," the director raised a finger for emphasis, "the coincidence is significant, and the possibility of compromise cannot be overlooked. The matter is just too important to let lie, particularly when we take the second factor into account." The director removed his glasses with a flourish, inspected them, and proceeded to polish them with his handkerchief. He was an articulate man, but the dramatic pause was not his forte. "You will be aware

*ASIS: *The Australian Secret Intelligence Service, Australia's clandestine overseas intelligence collection service, similar to America's CIA.*

*BAKIN: *Badan Ko-ordinasi Intelligens Negara, Indonesia's main domestic and overseas intelligence agency.*

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that all classified DIO reports are strictly limited in their circulation. Copies are numbered and are subject to strict regulations regarding accountability and eventual disposal. Copy number one of all reports goes to the Minister for Defence, copy number two to the Secretary for Defence, copy number three to the Chief of the Defence Force, and so on. I am advised that Dudley wrote a total of seventy-eight classified reports during the eight years he was in DIO, and that he himself retained copies number forty-one of all of those reports . . . for reference purposes. This was, of course, quite usual. They were, or should have been, kept in his safe in the DIO building, and would have been quite secure."

"I'm sure Nigel was scrupulous in his security arrangements," said Rawson. He knew what the director was leading to, but felt that the balance of judgment in this business was swinging a little too far against Dudley to be fair.

"Quite." The director adopted his most avuncular smile. "However, he did resign without accounting for any of those copies. Our records indicate that they were not archived, destroyed, or passed to anyone else. They have just, well, disappeared. This, in itself, is a major breach of security, but when looked at in conjunction with the drying up of Adder, the source of a considerable amount of the intelligence in those reports, the possible ramifications are horrendous."

Rawson sat poker-faced. He had still to be convinced. He knew Nigel, and that was not the way he operated. He was too shy, too introverted, ever to consider getting involved in espionage. That required, at the very least, a certain boldness, and Nigel was anything but bold. The mere thought of it made Rawson smile.

"A third fact," the director continued. "Dudley now finds himself the owner of substantial land holdings in the Araluen Valley east of here." His demeanor altered momentarily to that of raconteur. "I understand that he converted the old police station and courthouse into his private residence. I envy him. It's a lovely, historic old spot dating back to the gold-mining days. But he also appears to have suddenly acquired a private income that is totally incompatible with his previous earnings as an intelligence analyst. In short, something is fishy about our Dr. Dudley, and we want you to find out what."

Rawson nodded but remained cynical. The director just didn't know the man. None of them did. Still, he had been handed

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a job, and he had to report something back to the Organisation.

The turnoff he had been expecting came into view, and Rawson swung his car across a rumbling cattle grid. The track led him to the rainwashed lights of a house set back slightly from the road, more a collection of buildings than one discrete farmhouse, he noted as he drew closer. The various structures had melded together over the century of their existence to form a comfortable and large residence in traditional style. It had that aesthetic form that comes with function in the harsh Australian environment: corrugated iron roof, bull-nosed verandahs, and dark nooks and crannies here and there which no doubt added a cool shadiness to the building on a hot day. On a night like this, however, it dripped with a mizzling bleakness that camouflaged all charm. Rawson drove as close as he could to the front steps.

Dudley was waiting, framed in a rain-halo of light from the front door that stood open behind him. "Hello, Stew," he called eagerly. "How nice to see you."

Rawson waved a response and sprang from his car into the shelter of the verandah. "Nigel!" They shook hands enthusiastically. "You're looking well. Retirement must suit you."

"Yes, yes. Could be worse. Come in and warm yourself by the fire. Here, let me take your coat." Dudley ushered him into the lounge-room. He was obviously pleased to see him, and the words gushed out. "I was so glad you rang. Sorry I didn't catch up with you to say goodbye before I left. Those last few days with the Organisation were a busy time, what with security debriefings and the usual predeparture procedures . . . you know the ropes. I'm afraid I just couldn't fit it in." He fluttered a hand to dismiss the topic. "A drink? What can I get you?"

"A claret will be fine." Rawson spreadeagled himself in front of the fire and rubbed his hands while Dudley busied himself at the bar. "So what's an academic like you doing in a place like this?"

"Oh, just pottering around. Reading a lot. I like to keep in touch with events in Indonesia, you know." Dudley handed Rawson his wine and settled himself next to him with a glass of mineral water. "I might write a book one day, a sociopolitical study of Indonesia—nothing for Security to worry about, of course. Perhaps the odd trip or two to Java and Bali, just to keep the old bahasa up. You lose it if you don't use it, you know."

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"Look up old friends, visit the old haunts, eh?"

Dudley shook his head. "Not so much of that. I don't have many friends in Indonesia. I've spent most of my academic life on the outside looking in. Remember?"

"Yes. And looking in through a very powerful microscope, as I recall. Your work was highly respected in DIO." Rawson was slowly walking around the room as he talked. "You've got a wonderful setup here, Nigel. How on earth did you find it?"

"Yes, it is nice, isn't it? It was the old police station and courthouse in the gold rush days. I've always liked historic buildings." Dudley beamed. "I often used to drive to Araluen on weekends when I lived in Canberra. I enjoyed driving. Gave me an opportunity to think. I rather liked the valley, and when this place came up for sale, I thought it would be a nice place to live. I've done it up a bit, of course. This used to be the courtroom. The charge room was through there, and there are some old cells out the back." With a conspiratorial smile, he beckoned Rawson. "Come with me."

Dudley took a ring of heavy keys from a hook beside the mantelpiece and led his companion through a well-equipped kitchen and into a paved and covered courtyard. On the other side were two heavy, locked doors set in a wall of sandstone blocks. "The old cells." His smile broadened.

He unlocked one of the doors and flicked a light switch. On entering, Rawson found to his surprise that the walls were lined with display cabinets—finely-crafted pieces of woodwork, French polished and lined with red velvet. They stood in extravagant contrast to the roughness of the sandstone and pitted steel around them. But Rawson's eyes were quickly drawn to the contents of the cabinets. Carefully laid out inside were chess sets, each on its own board. There were sets antique and modern; an ivory set carved to represent figures from the Ramayana, a cast metal set in the form of medieval European figures, a set representing the opposing sides at the Battle of Waterloo, a stone set from Japan, a set with Chinese warriors, an American Civil War set, wooden sets from Africa and the Middle East, and even one in scrimshaw.

"Ah, your collection," said Rawson, smiling and bending to examine them more closely. "How wonderful. You'd often mentioned it to me, of course, but I didn't expect this."

Dudley grinned in delight and touched his spectacles

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nervously. "I thought you'd be interested. I had the cabinets specially made."

Rawson spent some moments inspecting the collection and then straightened thoughtfully. "You know, it takes a certain kind of mind to be interested in this sort of thing. Chess can be regarded as life in miniature. The conflicts, the deceits, the sacrifices, the tradeoffs. They're all there. But what you've done here," he waved his hand expansively around the cell, "is to represent all of that artistically. What you have is truly a representation of the sum of human existence. The purest form of art. I'm most impressed."

Dudley nodded happily. "That's exactly right. That's what I had in mind."

"Where on earth did you get them all from?"

A sudden clamor of rain on the corrugated iron roof made it necessary to speak louder than usual. "Oh, here and there on my travels. Like most hobbies, it started accidentally and just seemed to grow. You know how it is." Dudley pushed his spectacles up onto the bridge of his nose and grinned. "But you came for dinner, and it's late already. Come on."

They returned to the sitting room, where Dudley had laid out a simple buffet on a side table. They seated themselves in the deep leather armchairs so they could reach over to the food as they talked, and the conversation turned to other matters. They discussed recent office politics, mutual friends, and current affairs in Indonesia. They played the part of old friends reunited while the fire burnt lower and lower in the grate.

The conversation lagged just as the clock on the mantelpiece chimed eleven o'clock. Dudley stretched out with a contented smile on his face. He held the stretch for a moment as if pondering his next move and then, decisively, folded up and looked quickly at Rawson. "Let me ask you a question, Stew."

"Fire away."

Dudley was choosing his words carefully. "You know, it really is good to see you again. You never visited me at home when I lived in Canberra, but I enjoyed your companionship in the office. You were a formidable lunchtime chess opponent." It was clear that Dudley would never have made a success in the diplomatic corps.

Rawson grinned and looked down at the floor. Without looking up he said, "You know I'm here for a reason, don't you, Nigel?"

Dudley's smile became only slightly less amiable. "I did

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think that there was probably some other motivation for your visit than a social call on a boring old fuddy-duddy like me. But . . . it *is* good to see you again."

Rawson looked up abruptly. "Why did you leave, Nigel? What on earth went wrong?"

"Wrong? Is that what they sent you here to ask?"

"Yes, they did send me."

"Well, it's no great secret. Nothing went wrong. I could say that I left because I didn't enjoy the place, and that should suffice."

"Oh, come on, Nigel. There must have been more than that." Rawson paused for a moment, wondering whether to play his hand. "You know Adder has dried up?"

The smile left Dudley's face momentarily. "Oh, really?" he asked with a worried tone. "I see. And that's why you're here. You think . . ."

"What happened to all your reports, Nigel?"

"I don't know. Weren't they there? In my safe?"

"No, they weren't." Rawson's eyes narrowed. "Why did you leave, Nigel? There must have been more."

"Oh, yes, yes. It's true. There was more." Dudley calmly sipped his mineral water. "I'll be frank with you. I've nothing to hide. I was paid to research and write on Indonesia. But they really didn't understand my reports; they didn't value them. Oh, they were scanned by bureaucrats and politicians . . . and then promptly forgotten. But they couldn't see the wider strategic implications. I doubt they ever will." His smile changed to something approaching impishness. "My reports were masterpieces of intelligence analysis. Truly worth absorbing." He studied Rawson across the top of his glass. "Well, I like to think they were. I hope you'll forgive my immodesty."

"And that's it? Just that?"

"Yes, that's all. My work wasn't appreciated there. Isn't that enough? I spent years writing reports for the Organisation. And what happened to them? They ended up sitting in long-forgotten safes or classified archives, or, even worse, burnt." He sighed. "What a waste. I'll tell you the truth, Stew. I have not sold out, and the whole thing is just as much a mystery to me as it is to you." His face adopted an almost humorous quality. "It really is quite amusing that they think I might have sold out." With difficulty he took on a serious demeanor. "No, I left because . . . well, frankly, because I inherited some money. Quite a large amount, actually. From

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my uncle. You can check if you want. Ask my solicitors in Canberra. They'll confirm what I say. But as for my copies of the reports . . . I have no idea. I can only think that they are lying about in somebody else's safe in the DIO, as yet undiscovered. You know how these things tend to disappear at the bottom of a pile of old documents . . . or perhaps an inexperienced clerical assistant destroyed them without going through the correct procedure. You know as well as I do that clerical assistants come and go in the rarefied atmosphere of DIO." He sipped slowly from his mineral water and then looked Rawson pointedly in the eye. "Can you believe that, Stew?"

"Yes, I can believe that. Not because it sounds plausible. It doesn't. It's just that I know you, and I don't think you're capable of anything underhanded. But the others may not. You know they'll check up on your story . . . about the inheritance at the very least?"

Dudley nodded amiably. "Fine. They'll find it's all true."

"Okay. Well, enough's enough." Rawson looked at his watch. "I've done all that I think I can do, and I'm glad to have this distasteful job out of the way. I'll submit my report and let the security people worry about it now." His brow wrinkled in puzzlement. "But I have to say I still don't really understand why you left. Personally, I find the DIO a fascinating place to work in."

"Therein lies the difference between you and me, Stew. You're a military man, and I'm an academic. We're like the knight and the bishop: we have a limited complementarity. You crave order and organization, I seek a . . . a sort of truth. Sometimes truth and order are just not compatible. The truth becomes too complex for categorization."

"Perhaps." Rawson stood up. "It's a long and harrowing drive back to Canberra." He looked at Dudley. "You know I didn't want to come. Not under these circumstances. We were friends, but I think perhaps we won't see each other again. It wouldn't be . . . diplomatic."

"Of course. I understand." Dudley smiled his old amiable smile and extended his hand. "I am glad you came, Stew. It *was* good to see you again." He shuffled his feet and looked down in embarrassment. "Let me see you to your car."

Dudley closed the door as the car's headlights disappeared into the night. He walked slowly over to the bar, poured himself a whisky, and sat down thoughtfully in one of his deep leather chairs. The house had

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assumed that empty quietness that comes with recent departure. Even the rain had stopped hammering away on the roof. Dudley felt warm, comfortable, alone. "Bloody philistines," he mumbled to himself contentedly.

The fire was burning low, merely a pile of yellow-white embers in the grate, so he leaned across and vigorously stoked up some flames. A chuckle gurgled from his lips at some private joke and he reached again for his whisky. He took a long sip and held the glass up in front of the light of the fire to admire its color, laughed suddenly, and clapped his knee in delight. He had handled the situation well.

But . . . something was needed. A denouement was required after all this excitement, a fitting conclusion to the night. Impulsively, he turned and plucked the ring of keys from the wall. Glass in one hand and keys in the other, he strode out of the room, through the kitchen, and into the courtyard. He jiggled the keys to locate the right one and inserted it into the lock of a cell . . . the cell next to the one in which the chess sets were displayed.

He slowly swung open the door and reached inside for the light switch. A single bulb hanging from the ceiling suddenly obliterated the blackness to disclose that it too was lined with display cabinets . . . glass-topped, velvet-lined display cabinets, just like the cell next door. He paused at the door, glass in hand, with an amused smile on his face. Nodding in satisfaction, he stepped forward to the center of the room.

Dudley's smile took on that aspect of pride that only a true artist can know, and he raised his glass in silent salute.

Seventy-eight documents lay before him on the plush velvet of the display cabinets, side by side, in ordered rows. Reports on Indonesia, briefs on Java and Sumatra and Irian Jaya, on ethnic tensions, internal security, economic mismanagement, graft and corruption, the reorganization of the military, and the purchase of military equipment. All bore the number forty-one in the top right-hand corner. In red at top and bottom all carried the classification TOP SECRET AUSTEO SENSITIVE SOURCE. Eight years' work. Only he had a full set, and only he could really appreciate them. A collector's set. And they couldn't take that away from him.

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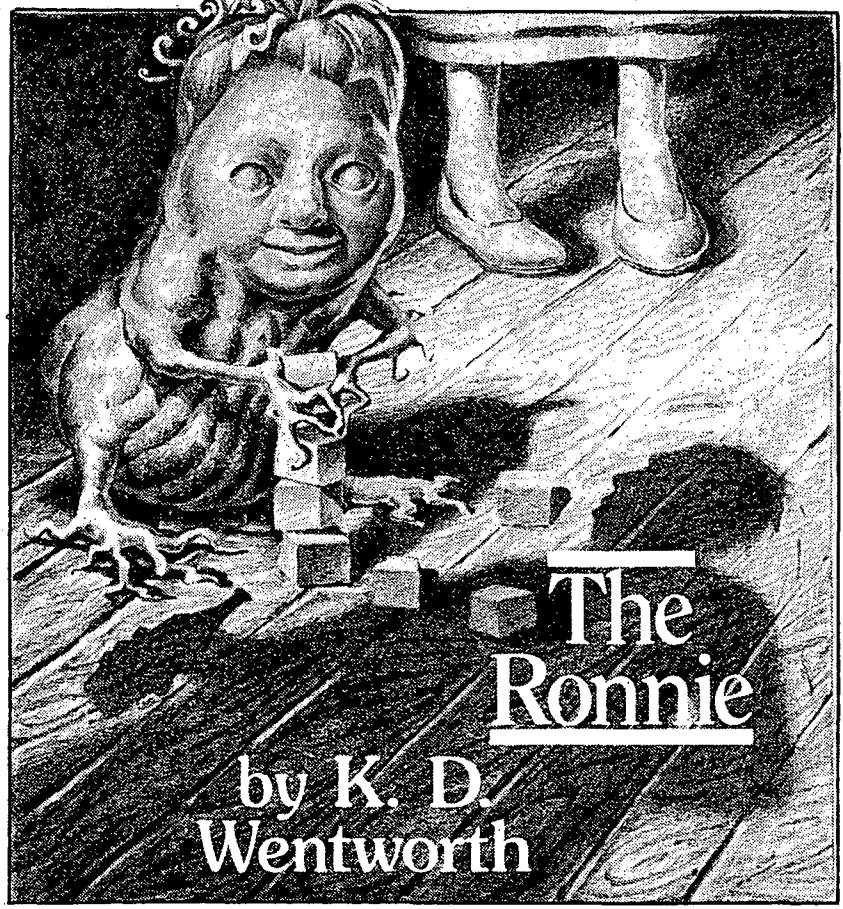

The Ronnie

by K. D. Wentworth

Drawing in the rich, earthy, greenhouse smell, Sarah Hopsteader bent to examine the sleeping vegetable faces nestled among the glossy leaves. "Well," she said to the green-uniformed VegeTot nurseryman, "I'm sure that these Eleanor Roosevelts are quite sweet-natured, just as you say, but I was hoping for something a little more . . ." she hesitated as she caught George's scowl out of the corner of her eye ". . . a little more attractive."

The man nodded. "Perhaps you'd like to see one of our Elvises

Illustration by William F. Pardy

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or James Deans, or . . ." He thought for a moment. "I think we still have a few nice Ronnies left in the back."

Summer sunlight gleamed down through the translucent overhead panels, turning the floating dust motes to airborne flecks of gold as she followed him down the narrow, leafy aisles. Behind her, even without looking, she could feel George spreading his disapproval over her birthday like a noxious fog.

"Listen . . ." George caught at her sleeve. "When Allison sent you that wad of cash for your birthday, she didn't mean you should just throw it away. If you're so hot for a pet, I'll buy you a goddamned goldfish."

Her mouth trembled as she smoothed a humidity-dampened strand of graying hair back into place, knowing from the experience of ten long years that it wasn't smart to go against her husband. Still, several of her friends had bought VegeTots in the last few years, and the little creatures always seemed so dear when she visited, scampering about the house on their stumpy legs, peering up at her with round green faces that always looked like someone famous, and—she sighed—when would she ever have so much money of her own again?

Kneeling down, the nurseryman pulled the dark-spotted foliage back to expose a small, leaf-shrouded form. "This is our Ronnie line, very popular with the politically minded."

Bending over, Sarah saw the dark green vegetable child stir as the muted light struck its closed eyelids, moving one tiny fist as if in protest. "It really does look like him, doesn't it?" She thought for a moment. "Does it—"

"Give speeches?" The nurseryman smiled. "No, I'm afraid that all resemblance to their famous namesakes is purely superficial. Still . . ." Releasing the leaves, he stood up. "They're affectionate and loyal, and almost no trouble at all." He punched a few numbers into the com-link on his wrist. "I'm afraid this lot is so ripe that they'll have to be composted in a few days if they don't sell."

"Composted?" Her lips pressed together, then she brushed the broad leaves aside again, studying the firm little face with its eyebrow ridges and precious dimples. Something about the cast of the eyes even reminded her a little of Myron, her long-dead first husband and Allison's father.

The small mouth opened in what could almost have been a yawn, revealing tiny green vegetable teeth, then closed again. Her heart gave a great leap, and she stood up and brushed the black soil off her jeans. "I'll take this one."

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"An excellent choice." Handing her a soft green blanket, he produced a short, sharp knife and, with a single decisive motion, sliced through the thick stem growing from the little creature's head. "This is a very vigorous strain, bred out of our heartiest zucchini stock. It's sure to give you months of pleasure."

Sarah accepted the squirming bundle and held it still while he dabbed yellow dust on the dripping stump on the back of its head.

"You'll need to apply this compound every day until the stalk dries and drops off." Folding the blanket over the dark green body, he pressed a packet into her hand. "Just be sure that it gets at least two hours of real sunlight every day, not just indoor light, and has a shallow pan of water available all the time."

A great tenderness surged through her with the feel of the tiny body through the blanket, but when she looked up, George was scowling down at the small green face. Her arms tightened protectively. It's my money, she thought, then walked back to the front counter to give the clerk her birthday money, hoping that George wouldn't make her pay in a different way for defying him.

"Three hundred dollars!" George glared at the glossy-green Ronnie, playing amidst his blocks on the floor. "And I don't care if it does slightly resemble some half-wit, long-dead president, it can't even talk." He wedged his arms across his pudgy chest. "For three hundred, you could have bought one hell of a mynah bird."

Leaning back in her easy chair, Sarah let his voice run over her until it was like so much rain, all movement and no meaning. At her feet, the Ronnie fiddled with his plastic building blocks, erecting tower after tower that had no chance of standing because he stacked them so crookedly.

He was such a dear, she thought; unlike dogs and cats, he didn't even need to be housebroken and asked for nothing but a patch of sun and a bowl of water to soak his root-feet in each day. In the three months that he had been with her, he had already reached his guaranteed height of two feet with no sign of his growth slowing, obviously a superior VegeTot in every way. Sometimes she even pretended to herself that he was like the real Ronnie had been as a child, and even if it weren't true, she finally understood how lonely she had been before. The house would feel unbearably empty without him now.

"Clever Ronnie," she said as he balanced a large yellow block on top of a smaller red one. Turning his pupilless green eyes to her,

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the Ronnie reached out to pat her leg with curly, vinelike fingers.

Then George's voice broke back into her musings. "—smells."

"What?" Startled, she looked at his sour expression.

"I said that stupid plant is beginning to smell." He ran a hand back through his thinning gray hair, then took another long pull on the frost-beaded bottle of beer. "I think it's time you sent it back to be composted."

The plastic blocks clattered to the floor. Reaching down, she gathered the Ronnie's cool green body into her arms. "It's all right," she whispered, pressing her cheek against the soft vine tendrils that covered his little head. "Go outside and play in the yard for a while."

He clung to her wrist with persistent ropy fingers, surprising her with the strength of his grip, but when she urged him, he let go and wavered toward the terrace door, balancing precariously on his short stumpy legs. She waited until he had pushed through the little dog door, then turned to George, her face stiff. "You don't have to say such things in front of him."

"*Him?* Don't be ridiculous. That thing is nothing more than a glorified squash." He tipped his head back and blinked at the ceiling. "It probably understands a little body language, maybe the tone of your voice, nothing else."

In the silence between them, the television droned on and on, some bit of nonsense about singing toilet bowls. She took a deep breath, feeling from the heat of her cheeks how flushed her face must be. "He understands every word. You have only to look at his poor little face to see that." Her hands clenched together in her lap. "Besides, he can't be rotting. He's guaranteed for a whole year."

"Well, I don't care." George turned back to the screen. "Just keep the stinking thing away from me."

"But you said that you would take care of him when Allison has the baby." She bit her lip, trying not to think of leaving her Ronnie alone with him. "You promised."

"Well, if I promised, then I guess I'll do it, won't I?" Draining the bottle of beer, he slammed it down so hard that she jumped and bit her lip. "I want another brew."

The autumn made dull, warped mirrors of the street as the taxi brought Sarah back through town from the airport. Her trip to Allison's had been wonderful, of course, and the baby, little Colleen, had been so dear that it had been

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difficult for her to leave, but Ronnie had been on her mind the whole time.

When the taxi pulled up in front of her house, she stared out at the white-painted brick for a moment. Had she really been gone only a week? The house that she had shared with George Hopsteader for ten long years looked almost unfamiliar. Then she nodded to the cab driver and got out to dash through the chill, pelting rain to the covered front porch. She should have brought an umbrella, of course, but as George was so fond of pointing out, she never remembered things like that. Shivering, she unlocked the door and stepped aside so that the cab driver could deposit her single suitcase inside the threshold. "Thank you," she said, then handed him a handful of bills and waved the change away, knowing that George would be furious if he saw her tip like that.

Leaving the heavy suitcase in the hall, she looked around as she pulled off her dripping coat. "Ronnie?" It would have been best to take him with her, but Allison and her husband lived in a highrise apartment building where he wouldn't have been able to get the sunlight that he needed. Actually, she'd come home from the airport by herself just so that she could have some time alone with him. "Ronnie, where are you?" she called again, but there was no answering whisper of little root-feet hurrying to meet her. Well, maybe he was out on the terrace, she told herself, although he usually didn't stay outside much when it was raining.

Draping her coat over a kitchen chair, she peeked out through the sliding terrace doors into the small yard where the Ronnie loved to play when it was sunny, but there was no sign of him among the potted crape myrtles and azalea bushes. Strange . . . She walked back into the master bedroom and looked in the corner where his little wicker basket stood, so close to her side of the bed that she could dangle her hand down and stroke his head in the night. No Ronnie.

Her heart beat faster as she checked her sewing room, the den, the guest bedrooms, but there was no sign of Ronnie's glossy dark green body anywhere. Where could he be?

Coming back into the kitchen, she saw the puddle that her coat had dripped on the floor, so she took it outside for a quick shake, then went to hang it in the hall closet. When she opened the door, something stirred faintly in the far corner. Frightened, she dropped the coat and stumbled back, but then she heard it again, a weak scrabbly sound—and thought that she recognized it.

Falling to her knees, she reached back behind the snow boots,

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feeling more than seeing, touched something dry and scratchy, and pulled Ronnie's limp, wasted body into the light. His vine-hair was dried and frazzled, his eyes closed, his skin a sallow, faded yellow-green. "Ronnie?" she whispered.

The vine-like fingers moved against hers slightly, then one of them cracked and fell to the floor.

Tears welled up in her eyes. How could this have happened? How long had the poor thing been shut up without sun and water? This was all her fault; she should never have left him.

A warm tear fell on Ronnie's emaciated body and his eyes opened slightly. Water, she told herself, first he must have some water, then she would call the nursery and see what else could be done. Handling the husk-light little yellow-green body carefully, she carried him into the kitchen in the crook of her arm. Filling the sink with cool water, she immersed him up to his chin.

Her fingers shook as she punched the number for VegeTots, Unlimited, and her voice broke as she told the secretary what she needed. After a moment, the green uniformed consultant came on screen, looking doubtful as she haltingly told him the story.

"I don't know, Mrs. Hopsteader." He shook his head. "When they're that far gone, it's usually kinder to bring them in for composting and just start over. Once those interior veins start cracking from lack of moisture, there's not really much that can be done."

Her fingers tightened on the kitchen counter as she stared back at his sympathetic young face. "Composting?" Horror rose up in her throat like a river in dark angry flood. "My Ronnie? You can't be serious. He's only four months old."

"They only last a full year if you take proper care of them." He looked grim. "And being without sun for that long, it could have permanent neural damage. You don't want it to suffer, do you?"

"N—" The answer stuck somewhere in her chest, fighting to remain unsaid.

"Well, let us know if we can be of any assistance."

She only nodded, afraid she would cry if she tried to say more, then punched the connection off. The Ronnie stirred in the sink, making tiny splashes with one of his little arms. Dabbing fiercely at the hot, ready tears that threatened to overwhelm her, she nodded down at his yellow-green face. "Don't worry," she whispered, "it's going to be all right."

As she stroked his poor withered vine-hair, her mind raced ahead, trying to think of what she would say to George when he came home. How could he believe that he could explain this?

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Three hours later, she still didn't know what to say to him as she watched Ronnie through the plate glass window, propped up against a crape myrtle out on the rain-drenched terrace, soaking up what little light penetrated through the dull clouds.

She heard the front door open, then close, but she didn't move, indeed felt that she couldn't move if her life depended upon it.

"I thought you were going to call me when you got in." George's voice rumbled through the house like sullen thunder. "So, how are Allison and the brat anyway?"

She opened her mouth to answer, but the stupid, useless tears started as they always did at times like this when she wanted so desperately to be calm and reasonable, adult and secure. She took in a great wrenching breath. "The baby is fine, but . . ." She broke off then, her voice wavering, asked, "Why?"

"Why what?"

She heard the thump of his coat thrown over the counter, then the whish of the refrigerator door opening as he rummaged for the first of his daily six-pack, and finally the tortured creak of the easy chair as he plopped into it. She made herself turn around. "Why—Ronnie?"

"You mean that damn plant?" Twisting the cap off the bottle of beer, he shook the paper open and settled back to read it, one arm tucked behind his head and his black sock feet pointing toward the ceiling. "Haven't seen it for days."

"You said that you'd take care of him." The words almost choked her. "You promised."

"Can't very well water the little bastard if I can't find it." He turned the page.

"You locked him in the closet." Her throat closed up hard and tight. "You left him there for days without water or sun."

He met her eyes briefly over the top of the paper. "So that's where it got to." The paper came up again with a rustle. "I wondered."

"You did it on purpose!"

Then he was up out of the depths of the easy chair faster than any man as soft and lethargic as George Hopsteader had a right to be, his forearm catching her hard across the throat, crushing her back against the cold, smooth glass. "This is *my* house," he said into her face, his breath heavy with beer. "My house that *I* have gone out and worked like a slave for. The minute I'm ready to get rid of that damn squash, I'll put it down the garbage disposal one inch at a time."

He leaned harder against her windpipe until she could think of

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nothing but the brittleness of the rain-spattered glass beneath her, which could give way any second under their combined weights and send her flying out onto the terrace in a pile of gleaming shards, any of which could slice her throat almost as an afterthought. "George—please," she wheezed as her vision fuzzed and his voice faded to a distant roaring in her ears. "Let me— please—"

Abruptly, he released her, returning to his seat as though nothing had ever happened. "I'm hungry." His voice was gruff. "When's dinner?"

She caught herself against the window, trying to blink the grayness away, fighting to keep from falling to her knees. Outside, the chill autumn rain drummed against the window, streaming down it in rivulets, cascading over the Ronnie's head and outstretched arms as he pressed up against the glass, watching her with staring yellow-green eyes.

After she got her nerves under control, she slipped out the front door and quietly brought Ronnie in from the rain, sneaking him into the guest bathroom where she stood him in the tub and dried him off with a soft thick towel. Her hands trembled as she heard George clatter through the refrigerator after yet another beer.

How had it come to this, she wondered, lifting Ronnie out and setting him on the tiled floor. Little by little, she had gotten so used to George's casual cruelties and drinking that she sometimes forgot she'd once had another, more civilized life—before her soft-spoken first husband had died.

Taking Ronnie's withered little arm, she peered into the shadow-filled hall, but there was no sign of George. Picking up the Ronnie, she pressed his wasted body to her as she hurried into the master bedroom, treading as quietly as she could.

As soon as they entered the familiar room, the VegeTot wriggled out of her grasp and wobbled over to his basket, still unsteady from dehydration and lack of sunlight. "Oh, Ronnie." She sighed, then tucked him into the soft green blanket in which she'd first brought him home. His unblinking eyes followed her every move, speaking his misery as clearly as if he could talk. Tenderly, she touched the few remaining broken bits of vine-hair that still clung stubbornly to his head.

"When the hell are we gonna get some dinner around here?" George bellowed suddenly from the den.

Her stomach gave a sickening wrench. Dinner . . . dear God, she

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hadn't given it a thought since that heart-stopping moment when she'd found Ronnie shut up in the closet. "In—in a minute." Gathering the wicker basket into her arms, she hurried toward the door, intending to hide Ronnie in her sewing room until tomorrow.

Suddenly the doorway filled with George's bulk. "Here." He thrust something large and metallic at her. "I got tired of waiting, so I started dinner for you."

Numbly, she stared at the huge panful of steaming water dangling from his hand, sloshing over at the edges to soak into the rug in dark splotches at her feet. "I—don't understand."

"Well . . ." He leered crookedly at her, his face garish in the half-light from the hall. "We are having *squash* for dinner, aren't we?" Then a belly laugh rolled out of him, filling the room until she thought she would scream.

She tried to avoid his eyes. "Please, George, if you'll just let me by, I'll get busy on dinner."

" 'Please, George,' " he mimicked her in a high falsetto. " 'Please, George!' " He lurched toward her and splashed her shoe with scalding water.

She bit her tongue to keep from crying out as the pain ate through her foot. *If he spilled that on Ronnie . . .* "George," she said, fighting to control her voice, "I'm sorry about dinner. Let me by."

"Hurry up, I'm hungry." Laughing again, he swung the pan toward her, slopping more boiling hot water over her legs. "Or would you rather fry the little bastard?"

How many times had the two of them done this? Lightheaded from the pain, she stared at his smirk; they had played this scene a thousand times in a thousand different ways, her pleading while he laughed in her face, hurting her in any way that amused him, then pretending the next day that none of it mattered.

"Stop it!" Her heart thumping so hard that she thought it would escape her chest, she put Ronnie's basket on the floor and hastily shoved it out of sight underneath the bed. "I'm not going to live like this any more."

"Is that so?" He wiped one handback across his face, then set the kettle on the floor and blinked unsteadily at her. "What are you going to do, move?" For some reason, the notion struck him as funny, and he began to snicker again.

She heard a rustling behind her as something husk-light moved. Her heart lurched. "Ronnie, no!"

"I keep telling you that the stupid thing doesn't understand a

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word you say." George shoved her out of the way and made a grab as the little green face peered out from under the bed.

Her face went ice cold. "Don't touch him!"

George paused, his face hidden in shadows. "Don't worry, darling, you're next." He giggled. "Here, Ronnie, here, you little bastard." He staggered forward, groping under the bed.

"No." She seized his arm. "Go sleep it off."

With an almost casual flick of his wrist, he threw her back against the heavy wooden dresser, cracking her head so hard that the room flickered around her—black—white—black—like a photographic negative. She tried to crawl after him, but her arms and legs seemed to be somewhere else, and it was all she could do to hold onto consciousness.

There was a sudden flurry over by the bed; then she heard George exclaim, "Gotcha!"

Blinking hard, Sarah thought she saw him raise something up in the air with one hand.

"Here's hoping that you make a better dinner than you did a president." He turned around on his knees, reaching for the pan of boiling water.

No, she tried to whisper, but her mouth was a million miles away and none of this could possibly be real.

George laughed again, then stopped abruptly. Hazily, she saw him stagger upright, then tear at his face, which seemed suddenly bulky.

Ronnie! She realized that her lips had moved, but had produced no sound. Why was it that George couldn't bear someone else to love her, even if it was only a poor VegeTot?

George collapsed to his knees, croaking while his hands clawed and beat at something that had fastened itself over his mouth and nose. Her vision kept losing focus as she summoned every remaining bit of strength to reach out a trembling hand and brush the stubble of Ronnie's broken vine-hair. Then the room and Ronnie and George all faded away into a soundless blackness.

"I don't think you should go back to that place." Allison's face was porcelain-pale as she folded the last nightgown and packed it into Sarah's suitcase. "I want you to move to Topeka and watch your new granddaughter grow up. There're some beautiful retirement condos only a few miles from our complex. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Opening the blind, Sarah looked down at the little park across

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the street from the hospital. Bright light still hurt her eyes, but it soothed her to watch the tiny figures of children at play, so happy and carefree . . . almost like Ronnie.

"I . . . really don't . . ." each word came slowly, as though imported from some faraway country ". . . don't know what I want." Her fingers sought the tender back of her head where the doctors had taken twenty stitches. "I still have trouble remembering what happened."

"And you ought to leave it that way." Taking her arm, Allison guided her back to the hospital bed.

Feeling a little dizzy, she lay back against the crisp white pillow. "You're sure . . ." she mumbled. "You're sure that he's . . . gone?"

"The funeral was two days ago." Strain lines reappeared around her daughter's eyes. "You remember that, don't you?"

"No, not . . . him." She turned her cheek to the freshly-laundered pillowcase and closed her eyes, trying hard to compose her thoughts. "No, I meant, you're sure that—Ronnie—*Ronnie* is really gone?"

Silence filtered through the room for a long moment. "Well, it was pretty broken up. The police took what was left away with the—body, but . . ." She hesitated. "When I went back to pack your clothes, I did find something."

Opening her eyes, Sarah watched her daughter put one hand in her pocket and then draw it out again. In the middle of her outstretched hand lay two slim golden ovoids. She blinked hard to make sure that her shaky vision wasn't betraying her again. No . . . she reached out and took them from the palm of Allison's hand, feeling the smoothness of . . . seeds . . . *squash* seeds.

Watching her closely, Allison sat down beside her and touched her face. "Mom, are you all right?"

Closing her fingers around the firm cool shapes, Sarah met her daughter's eyes. "Do you suppose that those condos have —gardens?"

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THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

Photo by Chris Steele-Perkins/Magnum

Going it alone! We will give a prize of $25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017. Please label your entry "August Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the March Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

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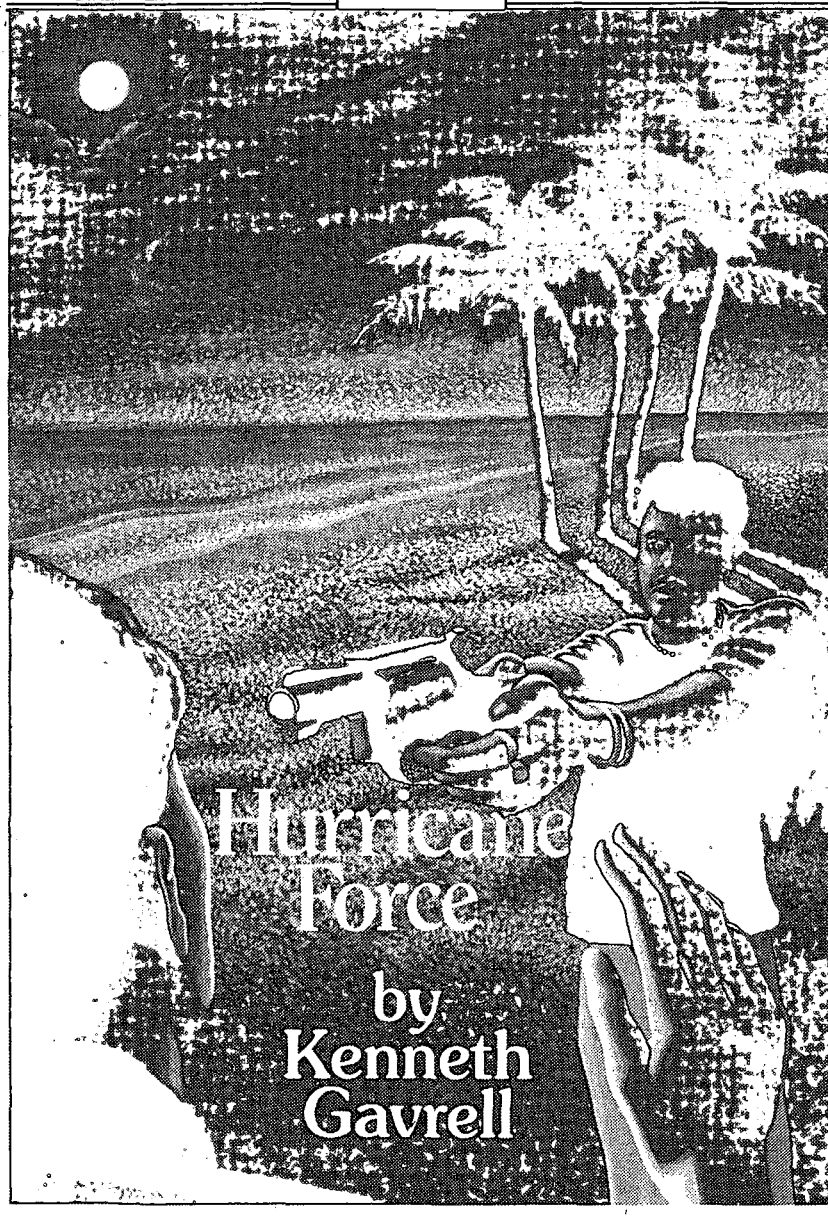

Hurricane Force

by Kenneth Gavrell

Illustration by Mark Fresh

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The hurricane that Puerto Rico had been waiting for and dreading swept in on the night of September seventeenth. By midnight, although we had yet to see any violent wind or rain, my electricity and telephone were gone. With the electricity went the water, since it was pumped up by machine. Raquel and I sat by the white light of a Coleman lantern until one, and then, worn out by the preparations and the tension, we went to sleep.

At three thirty I was awakened by the furious rattling of the large sliding windows. I got up and checked the apartment with my rechargeable flashlight. Everything looked secure. Outside a steady northeast wind was pushing the building and bowing the palm trees. When I got back to the bedroom, Raquel was sitting up.

"How bad is it?"

"I think it's just starting."

"Is there water coming in?"

"It's not raining that much."

"What shall we do?"

"Go back to sleep. There's nothing else to do."

I was awakened again at eight fifteen by a tremendous banging noise. I thought one of my iron awning rods had broken loose, but they seemed to be all right. Raquel was already up, listening to the battery-powered radio in the kitchen.

"What does the radio say?"

"The eye is still approaching us. Things are going to get worse. Many of the stations have shut down operations."

We walked to the glass doors of my living room and looked out at a grey wind bending the trees almost to the ground. The mountains normally visible to the south were hidden by the ubiquitous grey, but there still wasn't much rain.

"What's that banging?" I asked.

"I don't know. Something seems to be slamming against the building."

"I can see at least two trees down."

"There'll be more. Look at that roof across the street."

One of my neighbors had had a corrugated aluminum roof over his terrace. It was in shreds. Even as I watched, I saw a section tear off with a painful whine and fly into the parking lot beside our building. It just missed a neighbor's car.

"Jesus," I said.

Raquel said, "The people next door are camped in the hall. They're terrified."

I squinted through my hall door peephole and saw a yellow candle flame surrounded by shadowy faces. The family from 803 were sitting on the floor

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like Indians around a campfire.

"They may be overreacting," I said. "What's for breakfast?"

"Eggs and coffee?"

"I couldn't ask for more."

Raquel lit up the two-burner propane stove we'd bought the day before and pulled four eggs out of the dead refrigerator.

"All your food will go bad," she said.

"If that's the worst that happens, I'll be happy."

"Anyway, we have plenty of canned stuff."

"And water. That may be the most important."

"Speaking of water, it's starting to come in under the balcony doors."

"I think we can control it if the wind doesn't shift to the south."

I worried about my plate glass going. I'd starred all of it with masking tape to prevent shattering, but it was buckling and heaving like a fat man after a marathon.

I couldn't sit down, constantly checking the progress of the storm. About an hour later I discovered the source of the loud banging. The neighbor on my right had left his awning down, and the wind had torn it loose; it was flying about wildly, its cloth in tatters like a flag after a battle. Its inch-diameter iron pipe had slipped from the elbow joint, and as it battered against the building, it was edging dangerously close to my bedroom window.

"If I don't tie that pipe down, it may shatter the window."

"How can you tie it down?" Raquel said. "You won't even be able to catch it."

By now the whole building was shaking in the wailing wind. The only time I'd experienced something similar was during an earth tremor some years earlier. Raquel didn't like the shaking at all.

"The fact that the building moves is good," I assured her. "It's built to withstand tremors and storms like this."

"How nice," she said ruefully. Then: "What the hell is *that?*"

A huge silver object had just plunged past the window we were gazing through. It smashed into the pavement in front of the building. The wind immediately started flinging the pieces like paper.

"It's one of the big ventilators from the roof."

"If anyone had been hit by that, he'd be dead."

"I don't imagine anyone's walking around out there."

"You *couldn't* walk around out there."

The wind had switched to the northwest. By ten o'clock the storm was so bad that I couldn't see how it could get worse.

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Through occasional clearings in the scud, I could make out four trees down, one of them a giant. Another aluminum roof was tearing off a nearby house. Garbage cans were rolling around like tumbleweeds, and a street light had fallen from its pole.

And the wildly bucking awning rod was moving closer to my bedroom window. While Raquel was on one of her trips to the bathroom, I opened the window to try to catch the rod. The wind and rain ripped into me. The rod slammed into the concrete above it and then down into the balcony below. It was twelve feet long and moving with incredible force, its loose rope whipping around crazily.

I couldn't get hold of it. While I was trying, I heard the crash of glass next door. The rod had smashed their glass doors. Only one side of it was attached now, and it kept pummeling their balcony.

Raquel caught me trying to grab it. "For God's sake, close that window!"

I closed it. Things seemed much quieter all of a sudden.

"It broke the glass doors next door. I heard it."

"Are those people home?"

"I don't think so. If they were, they'd have done something about the pipe."

"They were idiots to leave their awning down," Raquel said.

"Agreed. They're strange types in any case. Not very friendly."

We could find only one radio station still on the air. An English-language one. The hero at the microphone told us San Juan was feeling one hundred and forty mile per hour winds.

"I wish this was over," Raquel said.

I took her in my arms and kissed her on the forehead. We listened to the wind shriek past the windows.

By ten thirty the balcony was full of water, and it was coming in very fast under my glass doors. We mopped and mopped again, but it was gaining on us.

"Thank God you don't have a rug," Raquel remarked.

It went like that till one P.M. when our lone contact with the rest of the world, the man on the radio, informed us that the eye of the hurricane had veered north and had just missed San Juan. We had seen the worst of it.

Shortly afterwards, the family camped in the hall returned to their apartment. Around two, I saw the first neighbors making their tentative explorations of the world outside. The wind had subsided considerably; but it was still raining.

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One neighbor, a former Puerto Rican player for the St. Louis Cardinals, was picking up limes from under a tree across the street. The asphalt was covered with them. Others were gazing at the downed trees, two of which blocked the street.

Raquel and I sipped propane-heated coffee and looked with wonder at the still-intact plate glass: We'd come through all right.

The cries of my neighbor half an hour later brought us out of the apartment. The family on the other side of me were already in the hall. The young man was standing in his doorway crying that he thought his wife was dead. From what I could gather—he wasn't too coherent—he'd just arrived home and found Ilsa lying near the broken glass doors of the balcony. At first he'd thought she was unconscious, but he hadn't been able to wake her. She didn't seem to be breathing.

I pushed past him and turned right out of his short entryway into the living room. The woman was stretched out on the floor, half in and half out of the room. Even before I got to her, I could see the ugly blueblack depression at her hairline. I checked her pulse, and she was dead all right.

By then Raquel was standing beside me. The twelve foot awning pipe that had been bashing the building during the hurricane now lay across the balcony, crookedly suspended at one end by a battered elbow joint. The other end of the pipe was only inches from the dead woman's head.

The living room was full of water. Everything in it had been blown around and smashed. It looked like a wet pile of garbage. Raquel and I went back out to the hall.

The young man was crying and talking at the same time. He looked at us anxiously. I shook my head, and he buried his face in his hands. I wondered how we were going to contact the police without a telephone.

News travels fast in Puerto Rico. In no time at all the whole building had heard of the accident. One of the neighbors on the eleventh floor was a radio ham and had called the police. But they didn't arrive for two hours, and when they did, they had to park up the street because of the two downed trees blocking traffic.

One of the cops was a wet-eared rookie just out of school; the other was my old friend, homicide detective Roberto Burgos. His eyes landed on me

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as he came out of the stairwell. "Small world, Carlos," he said. "Jesus, eight flights. I'm getting too old for this."

"If we don't get some electricity and water, I'll be doing those stairs a lot in the next few days," I said.

"We got a report of an accidental death," said Roberto. "What happened?"

"The woman in 801 was apparently hit by an awning pipe that was flying loose during the storm. It looks like she went out to secure it and got smashed across the forehead."

"Any witnesses?"

"No. It seems her husband was out at the time. He found her when he got home."

"He was out during the hurricane?"

I shrugged. "It looks that way. I thought they were both away, staying with family in the country. A lot of people in highrises did that."

"Well, let's take a look," Roberto said.

He told the rookie to stay in the hall and keep the people out. The young man looked aggrieved.

I helped cut a path through the crowd gathered outside 801 and led the way to the sheeted body. I myself had covered it two hours earlier.

Roberto pulled back the sheet, studied the bruised and dented forehead, the area around it brutally swollen from the trauma. He frowned and rubbed his stubbly brown cheek. "Only hit once," he said, "but that blow was enough to kill her."

"I think her skull's caved in."

He nodded, touching the wound gingerly as if he were afraid he might hurt her. He pulled a pack of Viceroys from his pocket and offered me one; we lit up off his cheap disposable lighter.

"Where's the husband?" he asked through a cloud of smoke.

"Sitting in 803, where it's dry. Raquel's there, too."

Roberto was examining the awning pipe near the body. He picked it up and hefted it in his pawlike hand, then replaced it carefully on the balcony tiles. He straightened up and surveyed the room. "What a *revolú.*"

"The pipe broke the glass doors," I said.

He nodded. "Well, let's talk to the husband. Without the crowd. Can we do it in your apartment?"

"Sure."

"Did your place suffer any damage?" Roberto asked.

"No. What about yours?"

"We lost one window—that room looks like this one. But the rest of the house is okay, *gracias a Dios.*"

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He instructed the rookie to remain outside the door of 801, and I went into 803 to get the dead woman's husband and Raquel.

I'd never liked the guy's looks. He was about twenty-six or -seven and *macho típico* with a lot of gold on his neck and wrists. He usually wore expensive pastel tennis shirts and multi-pleated slacks with tightish cuffs. He was a good-looking kid with angular features, dark curly hair, and a thin mustache. All his teeth seemed to be canines.

Four expensive cars parked under the building belonged to him, and he kept very odd hours. That was about all I knew about him. That was enough for me.

His wife, about the same age, was seriously overweight with thick hips and thighs and a face that seemed vacant of any knowledge that went beyond the *National Enquirer*. Unlike her husband, she was plain looking and wore no jewelry except earrings. She was usually in tight, unbecoming toreador pants and a T-shirt that did nothing benign for her. That was the uniform in which she had died.

The husband sat at my dining table across from Roberto and answered his routine questions. By now he'd stopped crying. Raquel and I listened from the sofa.

"When it was sure that we were going to be hit, I went to board up my stores. I own five liquor stores. I told Ilsa I'd pick her up as soon as I got through: we were planning to pass the hurricane at her parents' house —it seemed safer. But it took me longer than I expected to secure the stores, and by then the storm was too bad to try to drive back. I would have called but the phones were out—that happened around midnight. So I had to stay at my store in Calle Aguas Buenas overnight. I couldn't get back here till this afternoon. The driving out there is a nightmare with all the stuff blocking the streets."

"I know," Roberto said. "Was there anybody in the store with you?"

"No. I let them go home. They were nervous." He ran a beringed hand through his curly hair. "When I got back here I found her . . . as she was. It looks like she got hit by that *tubo de toldo*."

I interrupted him. "I heard it slamming against the building and tried to tie it down to protect my own window, but I couldn't grab hold of it. I heard it break their glass doors about ten A.M."

"So presumably your wife

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went out on the balcony before the glass doors were broken and tried to catch the pipe also," Roberto said. "But she got hit by it."

"The wind was whipping it around like a toothpick," I said.

"Well, let's write up our report," Roberto said.

He got the man's full name, Vicente Cardona Quiles, and his wife's. He got the names and addresses of the five liquor stores. He asked at exactly what time Vicente Cardona had returned to the apartment. Cardona wasn't sure, but guessed about two thirty or so. I confirmed that. Cardona said that since the apartment was such a mess, he would be staying at his wife's parents' for a while (his own family lived in New York). Roberto jotted down their address and phone number in Corozal.

He finally folded his notes into his pocket. He told Vicente Cardona that he was very sorry about the loss of his wife.

"What shall I do about Ilsa's body?" Cardona asked brokenly. "Are the funeral parlors in operation?"

"I doubt it," Roberto said. "But in any case the district attorney will have to examine her as she is before she can be moved."

"The district attorney—why?"

"That is the way it is in Puerto Rico. Whenever there's a death without an attending doctor, the district attorney must be called in to determine, if possible, the cause of death or to order an autopsy. That is why we have so many district attorneys."

"But when will that be?" Cardona asked.

"I've already asked on the car radio," Roberto said. "Of course, today they may be very busy . . . "

"Ilsa just has to lie there in that water until he arrives?"

"I'm sorry," Roberto said. "But in a death of this kind, it has to be."

"Well, it's a hell of a way to treat a dead woman," Cardona said in English, somewhere between anger and tears.

Vicente Cardona had left to await the arrival of the district attorney in his apartment. There were still some curious neighbors loitering in the hall. Roberto and I were drinking fresh coffee brewed by Raquel. She poured herself a cup and joined us in the living room.

"He looks like a pimp with all those gold chains," said Roberto.

"Or someone who runs liquor stores," I said.

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"Where does a kid his age get enough money to own five liquor stores?"

"It's a booming business. I do my share myself. But now that you bring up the subject, Cardona owns at least four expensive cars as well."

"Something's fishy," Roberto said. "Judging from the dead woman's appearance, he didn't marry money."

"Maybe he inherited it," Raquel suggested.

"He looks like he grew up in El Barrio to me."

"I imagine he did," I agreed. "His English is good."

"What else do you know about him?" Roberto asked.

"Almost nothing. He and his wife didn't socialize with the other tenants. It was rare to get a 'good morning' from them in the elevator. They got odd visitors at odd hours—that I noticed. Including one young man who seems to have the key to the elevator. He drops by every other day in the afternoons."

"While the husband is home?"

"No. At least, not according to my neighbors in 803."

"Fishier," said Roberto.

"You suspect Cardona of murdering his wife?" Raquel asked bluntly.

"How could he? Carlos told me he wasn't even home at the time."

"I don't *know* that," I said. "I didn't think either one of them was home, and the wife was."

"A fine private detective you are," Roberto muttered into his coffee cup. "In any case, I think the D.A. will order an autopsy on this one. If only to establish the time of death."

Events proved him correct. The harried and tired looking young D.A. arrived around six o'clock and decided to refer the body to Forensic Medicine at the Rio Piedras Medical Center for autopsy. They sent an ambulance over a couple of hours later, and Vicente Cardona was finally able to leave for his wife's parents' house in Corozal.

"There's one thing I forgot to mention to Roberto," I said to Raquel over a dinner of melted pork chops and canned pork and beans. "I saw a very good-looking young woman leaving 801 when I got off the elevator last night."

"What does that have to do with anything?" Raquel asked.

"I don't know. But it's the first time I've seen her. She wasn't the sort of girl I'd be likely to forget."

"Is that right?" Raquel said, her hazel eyes snapping. "Would you like to describe her or would that get you too excited?"

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"It would get me too excited," I said, shifting my legs just in time to avoid her kick.

"The woman's death was an accident," Raquel said. "Much as you'd like the idea, I doubt that any beautiful mystery girl was involved."

"One can always hope," I said. "Let's see what the doctor decides about the time of death."

"You're full of beans," said Raquel.

It was the first night in my adult life I went to bed without a shower; unfortunately, it wasn't to be the last.

Raquel was anxious to check the condition of her apartment the next morning. We found my car in the lot surrounded by broken glass; a fallen area light had just missed it. I kicked most of the glass away before pulling out.

It took us almost an hour to get to Raquel's place, which was normally a ten minute drive. All the traffic lights were out, of course, but there seemed to be cars everywhere: the curious with cameras clicking. The streets were littered with trees, light poles, electric wires, and signs.

The heroic English-language station was still on the air with the news that there was no looting in San Juan but a great deal of it in St. Croix, which had taken a direct hit, as had the tiny offshore island of Culebra. There was no telling when the electricity or water would return. The motors of the pumps at the reservoir in Trujillo Alto had been flooded, and replacements would have to be sent from the States.

Other interesting news items included people being mugged on the streets for a block of ice they'd somehow managed to locate; a hotel in Isla Verde whose dance floor, built out over the ocean, had disappeared; a condo in the same area whose penthouse floor had been wrenched right off the building.

Raquel was pretty nervous by the time we reached her street. But her apartment had not suffered at all. It had no awnings, and the windows were recessed enough to afford them protection. She was feeling almost elated until she checked her car. Some flying object had splintered the rear window and dented the roof. Well, the insurance would take care of it, she remarked philosophically.

We drove back to my place. There was nowhere else to go since everything was closed, right down to the gas stations and churches.

Late that afternoon Roberto Burgos dropped by with his

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rookie driver. He said he was in the area checking out a shooting incident. He left the young man downstairs in the car.

"Have they done the autopsy on Ilsa de Cardona?" I asked.

"You must be joking. They're running the Medical Center on emergency generators. Autopsies are not a number one priority these days."

"When do you think they'll get to it?"

"God knows. But the D.A. couldn't wait for that to establish the time of death. He had a doctor look at her as soon as she came in. The doctor says she died about nine or ten yesterday morning. So it looks like your neighbor was telling the truth."

"So much for the beautiful mystery woman," Raquel said to me.

"What?" Roberto said.

I explained, and he laughed. "Isn't one beautiful woman enough for you, Carlos? And a fellow detective, at that. If I were in your shoes, I'd be very thankful."

"Gracias, caballero," Raquel smiled.

"He's a caballero," I said, "I'm a lecher. The difference is just one of age."

"Then it won't be long before you'll be a caballero, too," Roberto chuckled.

"Ho, ho, ho," I responded appreciatively. "So you've given up suspecting something fishy about Cardona?"

"No, there's still something fishy," Roberto said. "But I don't think he killed his wife."

"What about her boyfriend?"

"What boyfriend?"

"The regular afternoon visitor with the key to the elevator."

"Was he around yesterday?" Roberto asked. "Did you see him go in?"

"No."

"Did you see him leave?"

"No."

"Then it's an accident," Roberto said. "Unless the autopsy turns up something different. Meanwhile, I'll investigate the other fishy odor."

The next week was pure hell. We ran out of propane first, and nobody had any. That meant no more Coleman lantern, no more hot meals or coffee.

Then my rechargeable flashlight died; none of the stores that were open had a flashlight, either. They did have batteries, but that didn't help me any.

Each day we drove to the house of a cousin of Raquel's in Guaynabo to fill plastic buckets and bottles with water. Guaynabo had water because their source was the Rio la Plata and

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not Trujillo Alto. We carted the water up eight flights of stairs. Soon we gave up on trying to get clean with "sponge baths" and showered at Raquel's cousin's.

After three days the telephone service was back, and some of the trees had been removed from the streets. Some of the supermarkets were operating on generators, but they might as well have stayed closed, since there was almost nothing on the shelves. No fresh food, little in the way of canned goods (except a surprising amount of tuna), no candles or bottled water.

The gasoline stations had gas, but no way to pump it without electricity. One station with its own generator was gouging customers at triple the price—it got a story in the San Juan *Star*.

Almost nobody was working except some emergency government employees. By the end of the week, everyone in San Juan was anxious to return to work—an unusual situation.

By then Roberto Burgos had found out more about my neighbor Cardona, as he informed us Saturday night at the only restaurant open in my neighborhood, a pizza place that had managed to keep its cheese from spoiling. Every table was full.

"Cardona came down from New York about three years ago with enough money to open his first store. Since then he's opened four more, one of them only last month."

"Where did he get the money in New York?" I asked.

"Since he lived in the Bronx, the rumor is it was drug money."

"Was he married up there?" Raquel asked.

"Yes, but only a few months before he left."

"And these liquor stores," I said, "are they just liquor stores?"

"As you know, such places are often fronts for selling drugs. I suspect this may be the case here. But again it's only rumors. When he gets back in operation, I'll see that the places are watched."

"Getting back to his wife's death," I said, "did they perform the autopsy?"

"Yesterday. Nothing unusual there. The cause of death was the blow to the head. Her skull was crushed. The doctor says such a wound would be consistent with a blow from a metal pipe such as that awning pipe. In fact, he says a pipe or metal bar would have been his guess if I hadn't told him about it. The hundred forty mile per hour winds would have given the pipe sufficient force."

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"Amen," said Raquel.

We swallowed beer in silence for a minute as we waited for the pizza to cool. Roberto was examining it through his tinted eyeglasses.

"Not enough tomato sauce," he said. "They never use enough tomato sauce in Puerto Rico. I prefer the way they make it in New York."

"In New York it's made by Italians," I said.

"Not always," said Raquel. She began to scoop a slice onto her plate. A minute later she released a colorful expletive as she burned her tongue.

"I think this woman's death was just what it looks like," said Roberto. "But I also think Cardona is pushing crap and I'd love to get him on that."

"You're a homicide detective," I reminded him.

"That's no reason why I can't give a little assistance to the narcotics division. *Yo odio a los tiradores*. I hate the dope pushers."

During the week we had watched the electricity gradually returning to San Juan. Each night there were more lights to be seen from my balcony. The lights began to form a ring around us reaching as far as the mountains. Eventually we realized that there was electricity on all sides except for the half mile square area in which my building sat.

"I can't believe it," Raquel said. "Just about everybody else seems to have it."

"Your place doesn't. At least it didn't this morning."

"The electric service has always been rotten in my area."

We were smoking by the light of one of our last two candles.

"It's just two blocks away," I said.

"One block away," said Raquel, "in the back of your building."

"*Coño.*"

But by the next night we had electricity. We both cheered impulsively. We drank a toast to Thomas Edison. Then one to Benjamin Franklin.

"How about one to Madame Curie?" I suggested.

"She had nothing to do with electricity."

"What the hell," I said.

It was another five days before the water returned. The negligence and ineptitude of the Water Authority had become a major scandal—front pages in all the newspapers. The governor was going to fire the head of the agency.

"At last something like normality," Raquel said. "I guess it's time for me to go home."

The next day we checked to see if her electricity had re-

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turned. It had. I started doing my own cooking again.

By now most of the streets were cleared of debris, and people were getting back to work. I called Marie, my secretary, and Raul, my assistant, and told them I'd meet them at the office at nine the next morning.

But there was nothing new to deal with, and we just cleared up any paperwork that had been outstanding. The phone there still wasn't working.

At five that afternoon I met my neighbor Vicente Cardona in our lobby waiting for the elevator.

"Did you get your apartment cleaned up?" I asked him.

"Yes. They're coming to replace the glass doors Saturday."

I was going to ask him about his wife's funeral arrangements, but decided against it. Her death had not affected the way he dressed or the quantity of gold he transported on his appendages.

"I don't know which was worse, the hurricane or the week after," I said.

"I think the hurricane," he said.

"Christ, when I saw that huge ventilator crash in front of the building . . . "

"Yes," he said, then added hurriedly: "Of course I didn't see it fall, but I saw it on the street when I arrived."

"That's right: you weren't in the apartment at the time."

"No," he said.

"Well, it was a sight to see," I said. "Only a foot or so from my bedroom window. Very close to your balcony."

"So I'm told," Cardona said.

We got into the elevator.

My telephone was ringing as I entered the apartment.

"I've been trying to get you all day," Roberto's voice said.

"My office phone's still not working," I said. "What's up?"

"That beautiful young woman you saw leaving Cardona's apartment the evening of the hurricane—what did she look like?"

"Maybe twenty-three years old—about five foot four—blonde, but I think it was probably dyed. Why do you ask?"

"The narcotics boys have been keeping an eye on Cardona at my suggestion. Last night they followed him to a seafood restaurant out on the coast, near Loíza Aldea. He had dinner there with a beautiful young woman, but this one was dark-haired. Otherwise the description matches."

"Well, well," I said. "Maybe she redyed her hair."

"I'm going to make some dis-

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creet inquiries about her," Roberto said. "She and Cardona didn't act like just business acquaintances."

"Loíza Aldea is a long way to go to eat seafood," I said. "Particularly with the roads the way they are. The only reason I'd go there is not to be seen by anyone who might know me."

"My thinking exactly," Roberto said.

"What time do you get off duty?" I asked.

"I just got off."

"Let's meet somewhere for a snort," I said. "I want to talk about beautiful mystery women."

I began my own surveillance of Cardona the next day. I followed him from the apartment at ten thirty in the morning. He drove to the liquor store he'd mentioned on Calle Aguas Buenas. At noon he left there alone and went to lunch at a Chinese restaurant a few blocks away. I sat in my car and watched him eat through the restaurant window. Before one, he was back in his red Corvette; I tailed him east on Highway 2, then south until he stopped in front of another liquor store on Calle San Ignacio. He was there for a long time. I bought two *alcapurrias* at a *friquitín* across the street and a bottle of Budweiser.

At five to four, Cardona left this liquor store and drove to still another in the middle of Santurce. He was only there for a short while before walking down the block to a cheap outdoor bar with loud *salsa* blasting the passersby. He ordered some kind of mixed drink and traded the time of day with the middle-aged bartender. Half an hour later he was on his third drink and kibitzing in a noisy domino game at one of the tables. He stayed at the bar until almost seven, then drove to another liquor store, smaller than the others, in a back street of Santurce. It was in one of those ominously quiet, rundown streets so common in Santurce these days. While I waited in my car, a three-cylinder Suzuki with a Domino's Pizza triangle on the roof drove up; a college-age kid delivered a pizza to the liquor store.

Cardona left that place at a quarter to ten and I followed him to a brightly-lit corner liquor store on Fernandez Juncos in Miramar. This was the kind of place that offered cut-rate beer and rum by the drink and had a crowd of men, mostly young, gathered in noisy groups in front. There were iron bars on all the windows and along the counter, with one opening for the passing out of drinks and collecting of money.

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Salsa blared from a speaker over the door. The crowd of men gathered on the sidewalk was feeling merry.

It's against the law to drink on the street in Puerto Rico. Apparently the law wasn't being very strenuously enforced these days. Two women who looked like prostitutes were circulating familiarly among the men. I thought I recognized one of them. I got out of my car and walked over to the fringes of the crowd. There was no doubt about it: it was the beautiful blonde I'd seen leaving our floor on the night of the hurricane.

No woman changes her hair color that often.

At one point she passed fairly close to me and our eyes met. There was a strange look in hers, but it wasn't a look of recognition. It was the kind of look eyes have when someone's floating six feet above the ground on coke. At the time we'd met, her mind had been on other things.

She didn't look so beautiful doped to the roots of her hair.

Cardona left the fifth liquor store a little after midnight, and we drove back to the apartment.

He didn't meet any dark-haired girl that day.

The next day was pretty much more of the same, the round of his liquor stores. The only difference was that this time he was driving a pewter colored Saab turbo. I did notice one thing out of the ordinary: he made two phone calls from public telephones, one before lunch and another in the late afternoon. Why hadn't he used the phones in his stores?

Dinner for him was another delivered pizza. For me it was a Cubano sandwich in a stand-up restaurant across the street.

Cardona left his Miramar store earlier that night, around eleven. I followed him out Kennedy Avenue to a condominium in Caparra that was badly in need of a paint job. He disappeared into the building while I lit a cigarette and waited for the local muggers to discover my presence.

By one A.M. he still hadn't reappeared. I was having trouble keeping my eyes open. It looked as though I'd discovered where his brunette girlfriend lived.

I was half asleep, lighting what I hoped, for the sake of my lungs, was the last cigarette of the night, when my car door was suddenly yanked open and I saw Cardona standing there glaring down at me. There was a small, snub-nosed revolver in his bejeweled hand.

"Open the passenger door," he said. "Do it slowly and carefully."

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I did as he said. With the gun pointed at me through the windshield, he slid around the car and into the seat beside me.

"Now drive," he said.

"Where to?" I asked.

"Towards the ocean. Let's take a look at the ocean."

I ground her into gear and headed back out Kennedy.

"You bastard," Cardona said. "I've noticed you on my tail since lunch."

"I must be getting careless," I said.

He kept the snub-nosed revolver pointed at my right lung.

"*Why?*" he asked threateningly. "Who are you?"

"If you'd been a better neighbor, you'd know I'm a private detective. The reason for the tail is that I know you were lying about not being in your apartment the morning of the hurricane."

"Turn left here," he said at a sign that read Carretera 165. "Why do you say I was lying?"

"Because you couldn't have seen that fallen ventilator on the street when you 'returned' at two thirty in the afternoon. By the end of the storm, the wind had blown the pieces all over the neighborhood. I watched it disappear."

"You're pretty clever—what's your name?"

"Carlos Bannon."

"Bannon? You from the States?"

"My father was American. I grew up there part of the time."

Cardona settled back more comfortably in the passenger seat. "Stay on this road," he said.

He hadn't bothered to frisk me for a gun; since I was wearing a sport shirt and slacks, there wouldn't have been much point.

"So what's your angle?" he asked. "Blackmail?"

"I'm pretty sure you wouldn't want the cops to know you were in the apartment when your wife died. They might go jumping to conclusions, like murder."

"And why would I want to murder my wife?" Cardona asked smoothly, caressing his skinny mustache with his middle finger.

"I'd guess it has something to do with a pretty brunette you've been seeing. The one who lives in that condo we just left."

"You do know a lot," he said, almost with grudging admiration.

"I'm a private detective."

We drove swiftly past the quiet streets of Cataño, the Bacardi rum factory, and the Palo Seco electric plant—a Christmas tree of lights against the black sky. At this point the

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road met the coast, hugging a narrow strip of palm-fringed beach. Quite a few cars were on the road, even at this hour.

"How much?" Cardona asked as if he were really interested.

"Say, twenty thousand?"

"Well, at least you don't think small."

"You seem to be pretty well-heeled," I said.

The hand with the gun held steady. I hadn't shaken him up any.

"Why did you have to kill her?" I asked. "Don't you believe in divorce?"

"I wanted to leave her for Gladys—she knew about Gladys. She knew too much about everything."

" 'Everything' meaning the drugs?" I interrupted.

"I guess you and Ilsa have a lot in common," Cardona said meaningfully. "She also threatened to spill the beans if I left her. I didn't have any choice."

He nudged me casually in the ribs with the revolver. "Pull over here."

I drove onto the sandy shoulder, and Cardona reached over and cut the motor.

"End of the line," he said. "Get out."

I opened the door. This would be the logical time to make my move. I'd probably have a fifty-fifty chance. But that wasn't what I had in mind. From the beginning, my intention had been quite different.

So I let him walk me at gunpoint down through the dusty palm trees to the strip of grey sand.

"You and Ilsa are about to have one more thing in common," Cardona said.

"Look," I said, "you can't keep killing people. I'll settle for ten thousand."

"You'll settle for no thousand."

I wanted to keep him talking, keep his hand from squeezing the trigger. "Tell me the details," I said.

"You P.I.'s even die curious," Cardona said.

"You have nothing to lose by satisfying my curiosity."

"Well, like I told the cop, I went out to secure the liquor stores before the hurricane, but I went out right after lunch and was back in the apartment before midnight. Nobody saw me come back. I guess even then I was half-thinking about how a hurricane could lead to an 'accidental' death. But that loose awning pipe the next morning really gave me the idea. I could see how that thing could kill somebody. So I hit her when she was least expecting it with a crowbar I kept in the tool closet. I guess that was about nine A.M. Then I dragged her to the balcony where you found

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her. It was necessary to leave the pipe flying loose, and later it smashed through the balcony doors.

"I sat there until I saw people moving around outside. By then it seemed safe to 'arrive home' and go into my act. There was no way anybody could prove murder even if they suspected it."

"And there still isn't," I said. "Pretty smart."

He was standing about three feet from me, the stubby gun aimed at my chest. He looked very pleased with himself.

"Tell me, does your girlfriend Gladys know the truth?" I asked.

"No, she thinks Ilsa died by accident. After a decent period of time, I'm going to marry Gladys."

"Lucky girl," I said. "You know, for a while there I thought your wife might be having an affair. Who was the guy who came in the afternoons and had the key to the elevator?"

"That was her brother. He's unemployed, and they would sit on their asses and drink beer and watch TV."

"I guess that's about it," I said. "You'd better drop the cap pistol now."

"You're so scared you're *loco.*"

"But not careless *loco,* Cardona. The idea was for you to spot my tail. It took you longer than I expected, almost two days. The idea was for us to have this talk. I'm wired for sound like a disco. My car has a homing device on it. Right now there are at least three cops behind you in the trees, one of them the homicide detective who questioned you."

When he turned involuntarily to look, I raised my voice: "We've got it all, Roberto."

And four figures emerged from the palm trees with drawn weapons.

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UNSOLVED
by Raymond Smullyan

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the September issue.

"As to trials," said the White Knight, "I've been to some of the finest trials in the world!"

"Oh, please tell me some!" said Alice, who was very interested in these matters.

"Oh, yes," said the White Knight, "they were very fine, very fine!"

"But will you *tell* me some?" asked Alice.

"Very fine trials," repeated the Knight. "Why only last week—or maybe it was the week before last—I attended a trial."

"What was the trial about?" asked Alice.

"Well, I don't quite remember exactly what the trial was *about*, but I remember it was about something or other."

"I would imagine so," replied Alice, who could hardly refrain from laughing. "It isn't usual to have a trial about nothing!"

"Quite right, quite right," replied the Knight. "The trial was *definitely* about something; the only trouble is that I can't quite remember just what that something was! It seems that someone or other had done something he wasn't supposed to have done, and so there was a trial."

There was a long pause.

"Do you remember anything else?" asked Alice.

"I remember that there were three defendants and that just one of them was guilty."

"Oh, good," replied Alice. "Who were the defendants?"

"Who were the defendants?" repeated the White Knight. "Who were they? I can't quite remember just *who* they were, but I definitely remember there were three of them."

"Well, what happened at the trial?" asked Alice.

"What happened?" repeated the Knight. "Why, the defendants made statements!"

"What statements did they make?" asked Alice, who was getting just a *little* impatient with the rather slow way the account was going.

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"What statements?" repeated the Knight. "What statements? I can't quite remember just *what* the statements were, but I do remember that they made statements."

"Really now!" said Alice, who was getting quite exasperated. "Don't you remember *anything* about the statements?"

"Oh, yes," replied the White Knight, "I remember *something* about them. The first defendant accused either the second defendant or the third defendant, but I don't remember which one."

"What about the second defendant?" asked Alice.

"Well, the second defendant was asked who was guilty, and to everyone's surprise he claimed to be the guilty one."

"And the third defendant?" asked Alice.

"Well, the third defendant was asked who was guilty, and either he accused himself or he accused the second defendant, but unfortunately I can't quite remember which."

Alice tried to puzzle all this out, but could not make head or tail of what went on.

"Tell me," said Alice, "did the innocent defendants both know who the guilty defendant was?"

"Oh, yes," replied the Knight, "the defendants all knew who was guilty."

"Then I guess some of the defendants lied, and maybe some told the truth. Is that it?"

"That's right," replied the Knight. "Some of them lied and some of them told the truth."

"Can you remember which ones lied and which ones told the truth?" asked Alice.

"Well," replied the White Knight, "I remember that the guilty one lied. As for the innocent ones, I remember that either one of them told the truth, or maybe the other one did, or maybe they both did, but I can't remember which."

This concluded the White Knight's account! Of all the trial accounts I have ever heard in my life, thought Alice, this is the most unsatisfactory! Yet, as Alice pondered more and more over this problem, she came to realize that despite all the White Knight's memory lapses, he had given her enough information to decide whether the first, the second, or the third defendant was guilty.

Which one was guilty?

See page 147 for the solution to the July puzzle.

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FICTION

Colleagues

by Bob Tippee

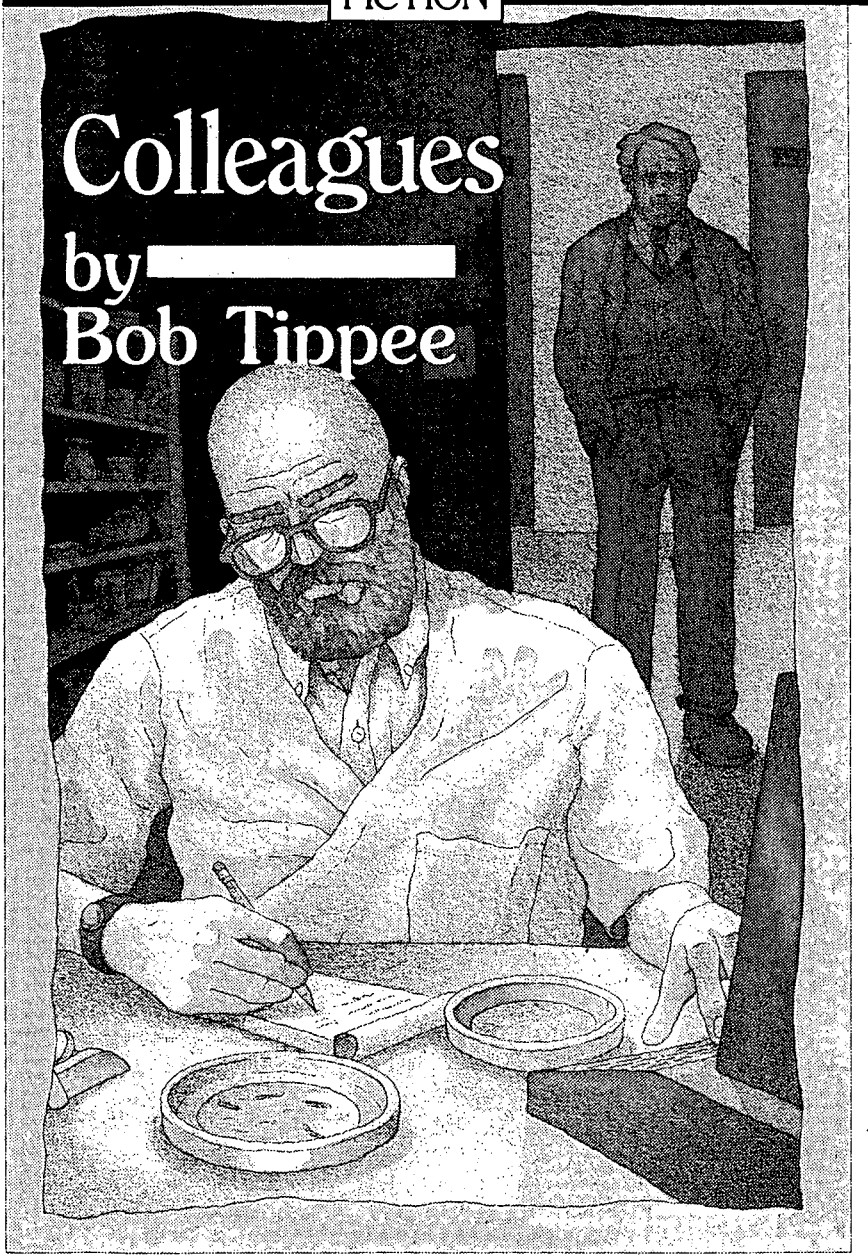

Illustration by Jim Adams

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I don't know yet what Senator Sands had that made his mouth twitch. I do know how he got cured. Seems like Dr. Bowers has got him a little something for just about everything.

I wasn't paying any mind to the twitch that first night the senator came to Barrington Laboratories. I got to say, though, that when the subject came up later, I recollected noticing it on the television during the hearings Senator Sands called his Genetic Responsibility Movement. That first night I was just plumb startled to fire up my security monitor after the front door buzzed along about midnight and to see him standing there, big as Dallas.

"Rex Sands to see Dr. Jeremy Bowers," he said into the microphone when I flashed him the "State intentions" message. He didn't say, "*Senator* Rex Sands."

I could have called the doctor right then—should have, probably. But I figured the doctor would just tell me to send the senator on his way, what with how they'd carried on at each other during the hearings. And I was curious. I pushed the buttons that unlocked the door and flashed the "Please check in at the security desk" message. Then, listening to the senator's wingtips slap tile from the front door to my desk, I wondered if I'd done right.

Mind you, I'm inclined to leave others be. I got plenty of problems of my own. Stress, mainly. Strain a little too hard on a job, maybe fall a month or two back on the rent, the stress commences to get to me—but I'm not one to complain about a hard life. Tend to your own business, I always say; others'll tend to theirs.

But I figured I owed it to the doctor to warn him about Senator Sands. Wasn't for Dr. Bowers, I'd have still been loading trucks for somebody who never understood that a man in my condition needs to stop now and then to take a little something for what ails him. Thanks to the doctor, I had me a uniform and a gun and a desk with a closed-circuit security monitor hidden underneath and a locker all my own to keep my stress medicine safe. And I had me a supervisor who believed I used to be a real cop and never came around nights. And I had me eight hours, five nights a week, with nothing to do but unlock the front door when the cleaning folks left, and again whenever Dr. Bowers came in or went out, and one more time when I left, just before all the other godawful stern doctors-of-this-and-that came to work. Rest of the time, I just sat there in my uniform, watching the news and all-night movies on

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my portable, sipping whatever I needed to for my health. Lord have mercy, I figured I had me a career!

Wasn't for a couple months' back rent and an overdue tab down where I picked up my stress medicine, I wouldn't have had any troubles at all—except for this bothersome feeling about letting Senator Sands go barging in on Dr. Bowers.

While the senator signed the visitors' log, I studied on how much he looked like he did on television: pinstriped suit and vest, a glowy tan, white hair in waves. I said, "I'll have to call Dr. Bowers."

"No—" he said, holding up one hand. His voice was low and even. "Please. I won't be long."

Senator Sands has those hard-as-metal kind of eyes that make it seem like when he looks at you he sees all the way to the back of your head and everything in between. So I figured what the hell. Dr. Bowers didn't know I knew I had my job on account of him.

"It's a private lab," I said, pointing down the hall. "Last door on your left. Dr. Bowers is the only one who works this time of day. Can't miss him."

And as the senator turned away, I unsnapped the trigger guard on my side piece, just in case.

I got to watch the hearings on my job up in Oklahoma. Worked nights collecting turnpike tolls at the Big Cabin exit north of Tulsa. Only people who got off the turnpike nights were truckers, so I could take my portable, prop my feet up on the booth, catch the news, and tend to my stress problem as the need arose.

It was one hell of a job until the state made me work the July Fourth shift down at the Tulsa exit booth. Didn't get a whiff of peace the whole day. First I got bit by a dog I didn't see in the back seat of one car when I reached inside for the driver's two bucks. Then some woman handed me her money along with the diaper she'd just taken off a baby that was still bare-assed and dirty in the seat next to her. I came to see right then and there that this wasn't no job for a fella with a stress condition, so I asked the next trucker that came through where he was headed. Houston, he said, and sure enough, he had room for a rider.

The point is that by then I'd seen all of Senator Sands' hearings on the news.

Oh my, they got ugly. The senator headed up a committee on health and science and was investigating something called gene therapy. Mighty interesting stuff, even for somebody like me who's always had to

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work and never had time for what you call formal education. These doctors have ciphered out how to fix folks' cells that have gone haywire. Thing is, they've got to get cells out of the sick folks, rejigger the genes inside somehow, then shoot the works back in attached to a mouse virus that'll carry them where they need to go. I'm dying if I'm lying.

A while back some highfalutin agency in the government said it was okay for doctors to experiment with this here gene therapy on folks as long as they got permits for it. Then Senator Sands and his committee came along with what he called irregularities in the permitting system. He wanted for Congress to set up its own office to hand out the gene therapy permits.

I remember thinking that was plumb sensible. Why, if somebody wasn't looking out, a man could think he was getting a flu shot and wind up with a butt full of mouse viruses.

But Dr. Bowers up and gave a humdinger of a speech to the senator's committee. He was a bigtime research doctor at Southwestern University up in Dallas at the time, and he more or less allowed as how the senator was full of what comes out the back end of a calf's papa. He said there wasn't no doctor would inject genetic stuff into a patient without telling him so and why. He said there wasn't nothing wrong with the way permits were being handled. And he said the senator was just trying to get power over something he didn't know squat about.

"Your law will set back genetic research for years," I remember him saying. "Sick people will die while you play politics."

About then I commenced to thinking, what if I was dying of something and doctors were trying to wrestle out a cure? Wouldn't I let them experiment on me if it was my only hope?

Damn straight. Reckon I'd drop britches and tell my doctor, "Shoot me full of whatever it takes, and I don't care if it came out of a mouse or a rattlesnake."

Trouble was, the doctor looked like he was just trying to save his own skin. The senator had him a lab technician who used to be a student of the doctor's. Told a story about the doctor giving a shot of genetic stuff he didn't have a permit for to somebody who ended up dying. Turned out the patient was what you call terminal anyway. There wasn't no way of telling whether the shot had genetic mixture in it or whether it had anything to do with the guy dying. Dr. Bowers

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said it didn't. So did the doctor who referred the patient to him.

Besides, the lab technician who snitched had a grudge. Seems Dr. Bowers had flunked him out of the Southwestern doctoring school.

"In thirty years of medical research and instruction," the doctor told the committee, "keeping that fool out of the operating room may be my greatest contribution to human health."

The doctor got a laugh, but Senator Sands got his law passed. I reckon when folks are scared, it don't matter who's right.

Anyway, the very day the law passed—must have been just a week or so before I hitched to Houston—Dr. Bowers quit his job at the university. Said so much bad blood had come up between him and the senator there was no way the school'd ever get genetic therapy permits if he stayed.

So that's how come I expected the senator's walking in on Dr. Bowers might turn out more than just a little bit interesting. And it's how come I switched on my security monitor and punched in the code for the doctor's lab and hoped these here high-priced bigshots wouldn't notice a piddly squatting thing like a camera port on a crowded wall. They didn't.

Dr. Bowers was hunkered over a bunch of glass dishes, a computer on one side of him and some sort of microscope on the other, facing the direction of the camera with his back to the door. He was bald and had a wiry brown beard with grey in it and thick black glasses that were always sliding down his nose. Slim and jerky, he had small, touchy hands, like a woman's.

The senator eased into the doorway and just stood there a few seconds, like he was chewing over what to say. Then he knocked on the doorjamb.

The doctor raised his head but didn't turn around.

"You have your nerve, senator," he said.

I didn't recollect ever seeing a mirror in the doctor's lab. The senator's mouth opened, and his head lowered some. Seemed like he was too surprised to say anything.

"I can't do anything for you," the doctor said, his back still toward the door. "Please leave."

Senator Sands looked like somebody who just got cleaned out at poker: one hand raising waist-high, making little circles in the air. "How did you know?"

The doctor pushed his glasses up on his nose and spun around toward the door. "That it was you standing there or that you're dying?"

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Now, I knew Dr. Bowers was a right smart sort of a person, but I never saw anything like this before. I reckon Senator Sands hadn't, either. His hand fell to his side, and his eyebrows floated up real high on his forehead. Then his mouth twitched, and he real quick rubbed one palm over his face, like he was thinking hard. I remembered him rubbing his face that way during the hearings, but I hadn't noticed the twitch before.

"Mmm-hmm," said Dr. Bowers.

The senator cleared his throat and got himself back his uppity ways. "I won't take much of your time." He stuck two fingers inside his suit jacket and slid out an envelope. "If you'd just read my physician's report—"

"No need to," snapped the doctor. "The symptoms were apparent during the hearings—to me, anyway. The mouth twitch, which you camouflaged nicely. The memory problem."

"Memory problem?"

Dr. Bowers spun back to his computer, typed something, and switched off the power.

"I wouldn't worry," he said, turning back to the senator. "Your fellow lawyers probably dismissed the repetition as strategy. I would have myself if it hadn't been for the twitch. Only a doctor would connect the two. Nervous tic, memory loss: Those could add up to any number of problems. The second time you dropped your pen I realized that your hands must be going numb. Very common in a person with your problem, not so much in other conditions with the same accompanying symptoms. Shall I go on?"

The senator sighed and shook his head.

"Two years?" the doctor asked.

"Year and a half. Tops."

I thought I saw pity in Dr. Bowers's eyes. It made me think about the time in the hearings when the doctor hollered at the senator about a doctor's duty to cure the sick.

"I expected you to come," he said. "Like this: early morning when you knew I'd be working alone, wondering if I'd continued my research in violation of your damnable law. Isn't it funny? Me—your last resort."

The senator looked up. "Well?"

Doctor Bowers slapped the table next to his computer and stood up. "We were so close! All we needed was to confirm our laboratory findings with human tests. We were in communication with federal agencies. We complied with all the scientific and health regulations. But it wasn't enough, was it? You had to get into the act.

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There were people—sick people—begging for experimental therapy. Most are probably dead now. Cause of death: politics. Even if we hadn't cured them, do you realize what we'd have learned?"

Softly, the senator asked, "Can you cure me?"

"We might have found the gene that's malfunctioning in your system."

This time the senator yelled. "Can you cure me?"

Dr. Bowers slowly shook his head. "Sorry, senator. It's against the law."

Senator Sands got huffy again. He reminded the doctor about his duty to cure the sick. The doctor reminded the senator about the law.

"If I told you I knew the gene causing your problem," he said, "I'd be admitting to having performed gene therapy on humans without approvals. I'd be telling you that I used injected markers instead of genetic scanning, which would take years, maybe decades."

Senator Sands crossed his arms and glowered at the doctor. "There's always a chance with scanning, isn't there?"

"No better than a million to one."

"Supposing you discovered the malfunctioning gene by accident. What would you require, other than permits, to begin treatment?"

Dr. Bowers frowned so hard his face looked like a hairy fist. The senator chuckled and said, "You've already found the gene."

The doctor shook his head.

"What do you need," the senator asked, "a blood sample?" He shed his jacket and began rolling up his right shirtsleeve. "We'll say you got lucky with scanning. It's really irrelevant to me. As I recall, it takes one injection once you've repaired the gene and attached it to the transport virus. Will three days be sufficient for the permit?"

"What makes you think I intend to treat you?"

The senator shrugged and cocked his head. "The Hippocratic oath?"

Dr. Bowers screamed, "Which meant nothing to you while you were destroying my life?"

"I was hoping not to have to bring this up," Senator Sands said with a sigh, strolling over to the doctor's table of computer equipment and glass dishes. "It's just something my investigators turned up that I didn't need in my hearings. Two years ago you committed fraud on a research grant proposal."

"What?"

" 'Biomedical remediation,' you called it. Sounds a lot less threatening than genetic engineering, which of course is

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what your project involved."

"My description was accurate."

"Also a deception, doctor. It shouldn't be difficult finding two or three grant proposal experts willing to tell my committee you used misleading terminology in order to secure public monies. It's a serious offense, you know."

"I did not commit fraud."

"But that's what it will look like on television, in the newspapers. I don't want to hurt you. You're a pioneer. But your work scares people."

"And you take advantage of their fears," the doctor said, talking mostly to himself.

The senator acted like he was trying to be patient. "Look, nobody asked you to testify before my committee. Nobody asked you to go to work for a company whose owner happens to be one of the country's largest political contributors."

Dr. Bowers backed to his lab stool and sat down, grinning. "Let me guess whose political party doesn't get any of Mr. Barrington's money."

"You're learning, doctor. Shall we practice a little medicine?"

Being not too killing crazy about needles and blood, I turned off my security monitor and turned on my portable, so that when the senator left a while later, smiling like an old boy who'd just sold a used car for twice what it was worth, things looked like business as usual where I was concerned. Only, of course, they weren't.

This whole thing rubbed me like rusty barbed wire. Dr. Bowers was fixing to do something he didn't want to do that might also be illegal. It set me to remembering how the air inside a truck trailer smells after four or five loaders have worked inside it a whole hot afternoon.

Like I said, Dr. Bowers was the reason I had my job. When he quit Southwestern after the hearings, J. B. Barrington hired him right off to work at his company inventing medicine. Gave him his own lab and everything. It was on the news. Made sense to me. I figured he'd fit right in.

Only he didn't. Dr. Bowers couldn't get used to regular day work and couldn't keep track of the card key they gave him to make the automatic security system work. I heard all about it after I started working there myself. Seems the doctor'd come in at all hours and not be able to get in the building. So he'd drive to some vice-president's house and pound on the door, waking everybody up and complaining about a place that locked its best workers out of their labs. Would've got anybody else fired, I suspect.

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Not Dr. Bowers. To keep him happy, Mr. Barrington unplugged the computerized security system and hired real guards, which worked out fine by me on account of it was about that time my truck loading job started to not work out. And it was true what I put down on the application about having a uniform job with the Oklahoma Transportation Department, even though I might have said a thing or two that made it sound like highway patrol.

Leastwise, that's why I felt beholden to Dr. Bowers, not that he had any notion about it. I know high cotton when I'm standing in it. And this deal he'd just got himself into with the senator looked like a swarm of boll weevils heading my way.

A minute or so after the senator left, the doctor came out, carrying a satchel. I asked if he was calling it a night, like I always did, and he surprised me by coming over to my desk and asking if I knew who his visitor was. I started to look at the visitors' log, just for show, and he said never mind and commenced to tell me pretty much the whole thing, leaving out the politics and personalities. I guess he needed somebody to jaw out his problem to, and he figured I couldn't hurt him none.

"So I can save a man's life and perhaps confirm a treatment that will save countless more lives," he said. "But if I do that, I'll be admitting to every scientist in the country that I've conducted illegal genetic experiments on human subjects. Nobody would believe I found the problem gene so quickly by scanning."

"Couldn't anybody prove anything," I said. "Unless, of course, the person who got the shot up and squawked about it."

The doctor frowned.

"Assuming there really was somebody who got a shot, which, of course, there wasn't," I added.

The doctor grinned and left.

Much as I hate to complain, I got to say I've had better days than the three that came next. I was getting notices about my rent and my stress medicine tab. There wasn't any way around it: I was coming up short. And now the end of my security career dangled out where I could see it like a snake hanging out of a tree. If Dr. Bowers lost his job on account of his troubles with Senator Sands, I'd sure enough lose mine when J. B. Barrington decided to switch his automatic security system back on.

The senator came back three nights later, and I watched

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pretty near the whole thing again without him or the doctor suspecting. The part I didn't watch was when the needle went in the senator's backside.

"Damnation, man!" he yelled. "You did that on purpose." Until then, neither of them had talked much.

I looked back at the monitor about the time the doctor was swiping with a ball of cotton at the hole he'd just drilled in the senator's cream-colored butt. "Did that hurt?" he asked.

The senator made a jerky production out of hiking up his britches and tucking in his shirt. "So what happens now?"

"Either the cells I gave you find their little ways to where they need to go and work their genetic magic, or—"

"Or what?"

"Or they don't."

"How do I know if it worked?"

"If you don't die, it worked."

"When do you want to see me again?"

Dr. Bowers threw the syringe into the waste can under his lab table. "Never. If the symptoms get worse, go back to your doctor."

"And then?"

"Beats me."

"As far as you're concerned, I'm cured."

"I'm afraid so."

"I'll be back anyway," the senator said, pulling on his suit jacket and smiling. "Tomorrow, in fact."

"I said our business is finished."

The senator walked to the door, turned back toward the doctor, and said, "My business tomorrow is with J. B. Barrington. My business is to tell him about the illegal research under way inside his laboratory. I'll advise him of my plans to reopen my hearings unless he reconsiders campaign contributions to certain colleagues of mine who don't happen to like me much."

The doctor looked stunned. Seemed like a minute or two went by before he said, "You can't prove anything."

"I don't have to," the senator said. "I shouldn't even have to reopen the hearings to get what I want. And if I do have to, I'll look like a hero—placing my own life at risk in a personal investigation, letting you inject me with God knows what."

"You're sick, senator."

"So all I really risked was eighteen months, recognizing that an experimental cure such as this presents some degree of hazard. But, hey, now I may be cured. Either way, I get J. B. Barrington in a bag with my name on it. That's what I wanted all along, doctor, not you. I knew he'd hire you after your luminous academic career came to its untimely end. And

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I knew you'd continue your research on human subjects, without the permits you knew you couldn't get from me.

"You were close to having a cure for my disease during the hearings; you disclosed as much in your deposition. Now you're confident enough in your findings to administer the therapy. What else can we conclude except that you never quit your human testing, even when doing so became illegal?"

The doctor slumped onto his stool and shook his head. "You have no proof," he said softly.

"This is politics," Senator Sands said. "I don't need any." He walked over next to the stool and set his hand on the doctor's shoulder. "The sad part in this whole thing is I knew you'd give me the injection I needed. You're a man of honor and morals, doctor. I appreciate that; I really do. You just got caught in some nasty business between J. B. Barrington and myself. If it's any consolation, I'll do what I can to keep you out of it this time. Like I said, I just want J. B. Barrington and the chance to grow old like everybody else."

Senator Sands offered his hand to Dr. Bowers, who just clenched his fists and began to cry.

Well now, night security work at Barrington Laboratories was looking more like a temporary thing all the time. Except I had me a plan. Plans come to me in a pinch; I reckon it's a gift, or maybe the practice a hard life gives a man. Leastwise, I had to get Dr. Bowers in on it, which turned out not to be a problem.

The doctor came out right after Senator Sands, looking like he was the one that needed to wonder whether the cure would take. Like the time before, he wanted to bounce his troubles off somebody, so pretty soon I got him lined up with all the right angles. All I needed to do was convince him that, except for my plan, he was fresh out of choices.

"I thought you worked nights," Senator Sands said when he signed the visitors' log the next morning. In the space marked "Person Visited" he printed "J. B. Barrington."

"Day man's got a sick kid," I lied. Truth was, the day man had the day off and my last twenty to help him enjoy it. I studied the senator's name like I needed reminding who he was. "Ah, Senator Sands. Dr. Bowers asked me to send you back to his lab. Said it was urgent."

He grinned and looked down the hall. "I'll bet it is."

"Said something about a treatment."

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The grin disappeared. "Treatment? Never mind. Forget that. I know the way." And off he went down the hall.

I had just got my security monitor fired up when the senator stomped into Dr. Bowers's lab.

"What's this about my treatment?"

Dr. Bowers twisted around on the stool in front of his computer screen. "Have you talked with Mr. Barrington yet?"

"Just on my way. What about my treatment?"

"Yes, the injection. Would you care to sit?" The doctor pointed to a swivel chair next to a filing cabinet. The senator ignored him.

"A side effect, really," the doctor said. "I wouldn't have brought it up if it hadn't been for this business with Mr. Barrington. Please, sit."

This time the senator pulled up the swivel chair. "Let's remember who holds the aces here," he said.

The doctor stroked his beard. "I don't want to sound as though I approve of your hearings or your law, senator. But the fact remains that genetic therapy does involve some complications that I might not have emphasized during my testimony to your committee."

"What's that got to do with my injection?"

"There can be side effects—severe side effects. Sometimes when we introduce genes, even properly functioning genes, where they haven't existed before, we initiate production of proteins that we don't want. The good news is that we can determine what those proteins are and how to counteract their manufacture."

The senator crossed his arms and said, "This smells like a bluff."

Dr. Bowers shrugged and turned up his palms. "If you think so, I needn't make my offer."

The senator stood up. "I'm going to see J. B. Barrington right now."

"I would hurry," Dr. Bowers said.

"Sure," the senator said sarcastically. But his eyebrows stayed high on his forehead, and he seemed to be grinding his teeth.

"Your symptoms may already have begun," the doctor said, glancing at his watch. "Slight headache, ringing of the ears, trouble focusing your eyes."

The senator's eyes got real round all of a sudden, and I reckon mine did, too. I had a headache, weird noises in my ears, and goo in my eyes. Only I figured it was on account of I'd swung over from night shift to day shift. Of course, the doctor and senator couldn't have

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had much sleep, either. Damned if the doctor wasn't doing better than I thought he would.

The senator's hands eased up, making little circles in the air. We had him.

"So what happens?"

"Massive coronary. Untraceable to the injection."

"And you knew?"

"The patient who died at Southwestern—"

"So you did administer gene therapy!"

"Your conclusion, senator."

Rubbing his hands together and pacing the lab, the senator said, "I could ruin you with what I know. I could go to the press, call hearings."

"I wouldn't allow myself to get this excited."

"It's all too neat. You're setting me up."

The doctor stood up and folded his arms. "I was going to let you die until you threatened to blackmail Mr. Barrington."

"Then why didn't you hit me with this last night?"

The doctor looked down, licked his lips, then looked back up, his head cocked. "To tell you the truth, I'm a little surprised to see you here this morning."

"I don't believe you," the senator said, waving one hand at the doctor. "You're incapable of—"

"Don't you see?" shouted the doctor. "You didn't give me any choice. You at least have the choice not to have a heart attack at any moment. And let's not make any more sweeping assumptions about my morality; a man with no choices can't afford morality. I'd prefer that you died right now. But to prevent your visiting Mr. Barrington, I'm willing to keep you alive."

The senator dropped his hands to his side and sighed. "Naturally, I have to agree to silence on this matter in perpetuity," he said.

"I'll have to give you a shot every week. Genetic blocker. It shuts down production of the protein that would otherwise trigger your heart attack."

"Isn't there a shot you can give me just once, like the injection for my disease?"

Now the doctor grinned. "If there were, do you think I'd give it to you?"

Senator Sands nodded at the doctor and said, "A fascinating proposition. And like I said, it works out so neatly from your perspective."

"Yes, senator, I might be bluffing. To find out, you can proceed with your blackmail of Mr. Barrington. Most people wouldn't take the chance, but then I understand how important politics is in your case. So, please, take all the time you want deciding."

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The senator looked at him for a moment longer. "So do I roll up my sleeve or drop my trousers?"

The thing about making plans, I always say, is figuring out what everybody involved really wants, not just what they'd like to have. Anyway, the doctor and me, we had Senator Sands where we really wanted him now. And me not liking needles and such, I turned off my security monitor and wished it was night shift so I could take my stress medicine.

By and by, Senator Sands walked out, looking a little pale maybe but not so much as you'd worry about him dropping dead in the parking lot or anything. He'll be in every week for the rest of what ought to be a good long life, taking an injection of whatever Dr. Bowers wants to give him and thinking he's getting what you call countertherapy to those problem proteins Dr. Bowers invented just for him. And I reckon Dr. Bowers won't have any trouble getting the gene therapy permits he needs when his own private human laboratory doesn't suit him. Ought to work out real nice for him and J. B. Barrington.

And me, I got a landlord who wants my butt on the street, a stress condition, and no more credit where I buy the remedy. It's a hard life, I tell you. But I got me a colleague now—a permanent colleague with real good money-making prospects—and, like I say, he's got a cure for pretty near everything.

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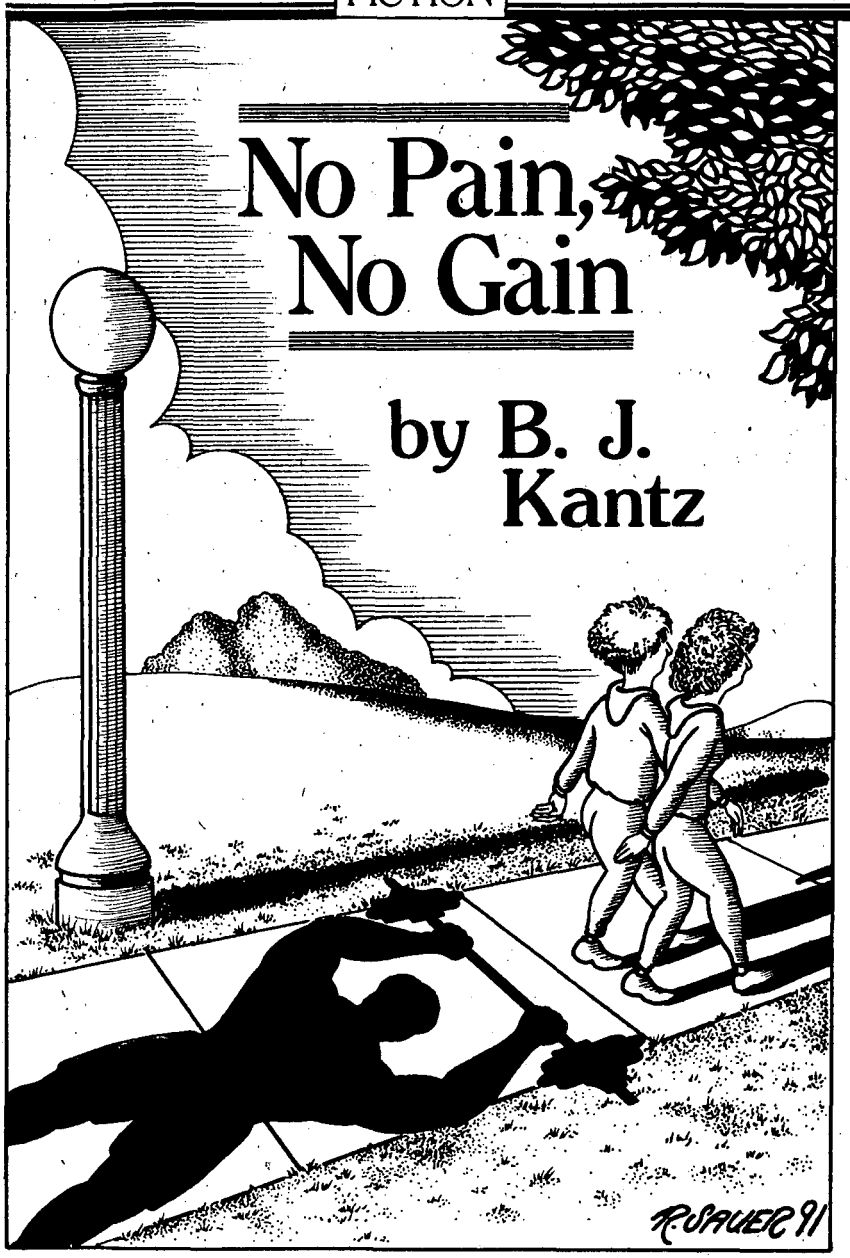
FICTION

No Pain, No Gain

by B. J. Kantz



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Emma and I go way back, you know. Back further than her first face lift, which preceded her tummy tuck and was certainly far in advance of her liposuction. Hell, I knew Emma when burning fat was something you did when you left your fries on the stove too long. I'm only telling you all this so you'll know that I know whereof I speak when it concerns what Emma might or might not do—or should I say what she might or might not have done, seeing as she's gone on to her reward, whatever that might be.

The two of us first ran into each other about thirty years ago. Make that thirty-two. My little Tessie was just sitting up in her carriage, and her Bobby was teething. Like I said, we ran into each other—literally. Our two carriages collided when we came at each other from opposite ends of the park, both of us moving at a brisk four miles per hour and cooing to our little darlings at the same time. The term "power walking" wasn't even in the vocabulary in those days. But along with my bundle from heaven, I'd received about fifteen extra pounds on my hips, and there looked to be at least an extra twenty on Emma's, although she never admitted to being more than ten pounds over. No matter how fat she got, she only cursed that stubborn ten. So we just naturally tried to walk them off.

To give us credit, we recognized a common cause immediately and started what soon became an important part of our routine. Every morning, winter or summer, hot or cold, rain (okay, light rain) or shine, we met at that park and twirled around it for an hour, giving our jawbones as much exercise as our fannies.

Bobby and Tessie graduated to strollers, then three-wheelers, and finally—thank you, Lord—to school so we could do our stretch in peace. Over the years we changed our careers, changed our hairdos, changed our houses, and even changed a husband or two, but we didn't change our eight to nine walk every morning. Maybe that's why I miss her so much now. Emma was a great friend and walking partner. Yes, she was a client, too, but that was one department she pulled up short in.

Emma lost her first husband to a blonde and her second to clogged arteries. After Artie (husband number one) took off, she decided a career was just the thing to get her started. Also, she'd learned her lesson: never rely on others for your security. It was a good lesson and one I took to heart, especially since my Dave had a secretary

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at least as good looking as Artie's bimbo, and he kept her on even though she couldn't type or spell worth a damn. Anyways, Emma and I both went through a few false starts before finding our own niches in life.

We both sold cosmetics door to door for a spell, but wound up buying most of them ourselves. Then Emma decided to run a child care center in her basement. It took her less than two weeks to bar anyone shorter than three feet from ever entering her house again. (Luckily, Bobby was a gangly six foot tall fifteen-year-old by that time or he would've been out of there.) I had a similar experience when I did some junior high substitute teaching but tried not to let it influence my feelings for Tess, since I couldn't afford boarding school and she was too old to give up for adoption.

It took us a few years, but finally Emma wound up as a crackerjack realtor and I wound up decorating most of the homes she sold. Now, this did make me a little beholden to her, but I surely paid my dues over the years every time I redid her house, which is what I was doing when Emma met her Maker.

"Just a little wallpaper, Marge. Is that too much to ask? Come over next Wednesday and help me find some darling paper for my hall bath."

Inwardly, I groaned. Not only was this going to take an age, but I wasn't even going to make any money out of it. Emma's hall bath was the size of a shoebox, a baby's shoebox. And Emma would insist on seeing at least five million papers before she decided on one that I had shown her the first day and couldn't even remember anymore. "What's wrong with the paper you have?" I whined. "I think it's lovely." (It should be; it took her six months to decide on it.)

"Ed doesn't like it."

"And who, pray tell, is Ed?"

"Oh, didn't I tell you?" she asked coyly.

"No," I replied, trying not to grind my teeth down to nubs. I really hated it when Emma tried to be coy. Fifty-three-year-old grandmothers should not be coy. Don't ask me why; they just shouldn't. And who was this chump who dared to criticize a bathroom I'd sweated over for six months? Emma's taste in men hadn't improved much since Artie.

"He's a body sculptor," she said, "and he's going to do me as a sort of favor."

It takes a lot to interrupt me when I'm into my four mile walk. I'd even begrudged stopping for a gent who'd had a heart attack by the water foun-

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tain. I figured if he'd walked every day instead of filling his gut with cholesterol killers like the doughnuts he was carrying, I wouldn't have had to ruin my whole morning giving him CPR. But Emma managed to stop me with that statement.

"What in hell is a body sculptor, and how did you meet this guy?"

"Marge, your tone leaves much to be desired. Surely you know body sculptors are personal trainers who can do wonders reshaping the body through exercise and massage. And I met him at Al's."

Could've knocked me over with a feather. It'd been years since I'd gone to Al's Gym. The place used to be as down-to-earth and no-frills as its name. I'd gone there after my first divorce to use their Nautilus equipment and hopefully build a few muscles. Tess thought it was a good idea, since we would be living alone without the manly protection of her father (a skinny wimp who fainted at the sight of his own blood when I punched him in the nose after finding panties, two sizes smaller than mine, in the back seat of our Chevy). I agreed to go, since I could take out my anger on padded steel and maybe lose a few inches in the process. (It really bugged me that those panties were smaller than mine.)

In those days the clientele wore sweats and cutoff jeans. I hightailed it out of there when color-coordinated stretch leotards took over and Al threw out the Coke machine and opened a designer-water bar. Interior design is full of enough foolishness; when I sweat, I like it to be honest.

So it was no wonder I thought personal trainers were for Olympic athletes, not for middle-aged women looking for husband number three and wearing face lift number two. Shows what I knew.

"If this guy is working with you at the gym, how does he know what your bathroom paper looks like?"

"Marge, the only thing you seem to keep up with is your profession. Personal trainers work with you in your home. Everyone knows that."

A tiny chink of light started to illuminate my woeful ignorance. I'd noticed lately how Emma seemed to keep up whenever the track team from the local university did their cool-down walk in front of us. Maybe they inspired her to move faster, I had thought. Now I was wondering if the inspiration was a different sort. All those hard young bodies, all those firm male butts. "This Ed wouldn't happen to be young, under thirty, say, would he?"

At least Emma had the grace

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to blush a little. "Why, I'd say he might be. I've never asked, of course. None of my business." Then she gave me one of those damn coy smiles again.

That tore it; I stood there right in the middle of the path and gave her a piece of my mind. "Emma Pilc, there's no fool like an old one. There's only one reason a young man wants to go around massaging a female old enough to know better. He's after your money, and I'm not talkin' about an hourly wage. You'd better watch out. Husband number two wiped out most of your commissions for the year. This one could be after even more."

"Just shows how much you know, Marge Feder. As I recall, that second husband of yours wasn't any beauty, either. How many balloon shades did that cost you?"

"At least he wasn't just out of his Pampers. God, they didn't even have Pampers when our kids were babies. Just be careful is all I'm saying. You've got that darned life-is-lollipops-and-roses look, and I've seen it get you into trouble more than once."

"Well, my life is lollipops and roses right now, and you're just jealous. As far as Eddie costing me money, why, he's going to make me rich, not poor. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to finish this walk. I have to meet Tom Patterson over at the bank. Don't forget our appointment next Wednesday. Bring as many papers as you can. Eddie will be there, and you can see for yourself how intelligent and wonderful he is."

With that, she turned and walked away, cutting across the field to the parking lot. Her fanny jiggled up and down as she half ran, half walked. If Eddie, as she called him, was really going to sculpt her, he was going to have to use a sharp knife, I thought, just the tiniest bit maliciously. Now I cringe when I remember that.

Wednesday I loaded my car down with every vinyl-coated paper in the shop, at least twenty books full. For once I was going to make Emma decide on my first visit. Besides, while she was busy giving all those papers the onceover, I could give her lover boy a good look, too. I was even more curious about him than before, especially after I'd run into Tom Patterson down at the coffee shop.

Tom's been running our small local bank for the last twenty years. Took over for his dad when he had a stroke. He and I had something going for a while after Dave left, but we found we liked each other too much to screw it up by getting married, so we decided to settle for a solid friendship. The best

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decision I ever made—that and quitting substitute teaching.

Tom was worried about Emma. Danced about the subject for almost half an hour till I told him to cut the crap and say what he had to say.

"She wants to pull her money out of a great thirty-year C.D. she socked away when interest rates were sky high, take the loss, and invest in some harebrained business. I'm only tellin' you this 'cause you two are so close. Maybe you can get her to confide in you so you can talk her out of it."

"Business wouldn't have anything to do with sculpting bodies, would it?"

"You know! Can't you do something? If she loses the money in that C.D. she'll be selling houses from her walker someday. There'll be no condo on the beach in Florida for her retirement like she always wanted. She'll be lucky to be able to afford a weekend in Atlantic City. You've gotta do something."

"Tom, she's in love with some Mr. America. You know, a yuppie Charles Atlas who wants to open his own place, or has obviously told her he does."

"In love?" Tom sounded defeated. He'd lived through husband number two and a few almost number threes as well.

"Yeah, I'm going to meet him on Wednesday when I go over to show her some wallpaper."

"She's redecorating, too?"

"Eddie, that's his name, doesn't like her last choice for the hall bath, which only took half a year to make."

"God, if she's redecorating, too . . ."

I knew what he meant. A bad sign when Emma started redoing things. Often drapes and wallpapers were only the beginning. She'd put in a whole new kitchen just before she broke up with her last boyfriend. At least I made some money on that one. "I'll do what I can," I promised him. "Look, this guy met her down at Al's. Maybe he can give you some background on him."

Tom nodded. He and Al played poker every Friday. At least it was a start.

Before I knew it, it was Wednesday and most of the news Tom had given me the night before was bad. Emma had taken her money out of the C.D. and put it in a checking account. The only thing Al knew about this Eddie character was that he had a build like Schwarzenegger and had doubled the female clientele of the gym since he'd started working there as a consultant. Al was real upset to hear he might be striking out on his own. Ridgebeck wasn't big enough for two designer-water bars, let alone gyms. The only good

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news Tom had was that no checks had yet been drawn on Emma's account.

Emma and I studiously avoided the subject of Ed on our morning walks. I had decided to meet the guy before I settled on my strategy. When I pulled into Emma's driveway, I said a small prayer to St. Jude. I'm not much of a churchgoer, but like the man said, there are damn few atheists in foxholes.

When Ed opened the door, I gained a new appreciation for Emma's point of view. A beautiful hunk of man, over six feet of macho covered with muscles on muscles and topped off with a head of gorgeous black curly hair still wet from the shower. Sort of like Superman in a sweatsuit.

"You must be Marge, Emma's dearest friend." He took the books from my arms and set them down, then clasped my hands in his big, soft, strong ones and pulled me into the house, talking nonstop about how it was such a thrill meeting me and so on and so on. All nonsense, but I just liked watching him talk. Even his jaw had muscles.

By the time we were sitting on the couch, I was ready to take him on with my razor-sharp intellect. "Where's Emma?" I squeaked after clearing my throat twice. No fool I. It'd only taken me five minutes to notice she wasn't in the room.

"We just finished working out. She's upstairs taking a shower. Should be down soon."

Ah, yes, the shower. Of course I heard it. I'd just thought it was the blood rushing to my head.

"You'll have to come out with us for lunch after we look at the papers. We can celebrate."

"Celibate, ah, celebrate?" I asked, always ready with a witty comeback. "Celebrate what?"

"Oops, I let the cat out of the bag." He smiled and put his hand on my knee. (I decided then and there I'd give him a half hour to stop that.) "Emma wanted to surprise you. Don't tell her I told you when she comes down, but we signed the papers this morning. Emma and I are officially partners now. Isn't it great?"

"Wonderful," I managed to blurt out. So much for prayers in foxholes. Poor Emma would probably lose everything to this fabulous looking con man. I didn't know whether to pity her or envy her.

The shower stopped, and Ed went to the foot of the stairs. "Emma, honey, Marge is here."

"I'll be right down," she sang out. "Just give me a few minutes."

I didn't know what to say. I'd totally failed in my purpose.

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Everything had happened too fast. Why hadn't Tom called this morning and told me she took out the money? But maybe she hadn't. Maybe there was one ray of hope left. "Ah, Ed. Before we go to lunch, do you have to go to the bank? To deposit any checks or anything? You know, for the new business? Because if you do, I'll . . . ah . . . I'll cash a check for . . . ah . . . for some cash. You know . . . for lunch. Yes, I need some cash for lunch. That's it." I should have been a government agent I was so clever and subtle. Ed came back and sat next to me again. His hand found the same spot on my knee. The heat must've drawn it there. "Marge, honey. No problems. Our celebration, our treat. Besides, we deposited Emma's check just before we did our workout."

Damn! I gave up. I was just about to ask his opinion of my pecs when we heard the most godawful crash upstairs.

"What was that?" Ed cried and raced up the stairs.

I was right behind him. We took them two at a time. Going up, I thought I heard a soft buzzing sound, but when we reached the landing, it had disappeared. "Sounded like the weights in the exercise room," he said. And we raced down the hall, passing the open door of the bathroom. I noticed a wet towel on the floor and the shower door open and dripping.

Now, I had completely revamped Emma's upstairs after she started dating the pharmacist from New Jersey. Did everything from a whirlpool and a sauna to an entertainment center. Unfortunately, mid-job they broke up, so what was to have been an elegant dressing room complete with floor to ceiling mirrors and a marble floor became a workout room with a bar, a treadmill, some free weights, a Stairmaster, and a professional scale. Emma was lying on the hard marble floor. Her honey-blonde hair (a special Clairol shade) was soaking wet and bloodied. It left a puddle on the damp floor. Next to her head rested a barbell, which was also covered in blood.

"Oh, my God. She must've slipped on the wet floor and hit her head. Emma, speak to me, baby." Ed knelt down to feel her neck, brushing aside the gold rope necklace she usually wore. From the angle of her head, I didn't expect to find a pulse.

I didn't want to disturb anything, but I had to pull the flap of her terrycloth robe over her damp, nude body. It was the last thing I did for her before I called the police.

Ed followed me down to the living room where I was wait-

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ing for the sound of sirens. I'd come to help, but it was too little, too late.

"She must've fallen, you know," he said, his voice cracking. "That damn marble floor gets so slippery when it gets wet, and I guess I dripped on it too when I went in there to get my sweats."

I knew. I'd sold it to her. Lousy room was supposed to have been a thirties kind of boudoir, not a workout room. Not many barbells to smash your head on in boudoirs.

"Why did she go in there, Ed? She was supposed to get dressed and come down. What was she doing there?"

"Weighing herself, as always. Like most women, she was obsessed with how much she weighed. Used to tell her it's inches, not pounds, you gotta watch. But no . . ." He shook his head. "Always had to weigh herself, especially after a workout."

I nodded. I did the same thing myself after I walked. Always told myself it didn't matter as long as I fit into my clothes, but still I . . . The police siren interrupted my train of thought.

The police chief came in with some of his men. Most of them went upstairs, but one of the detectives took our statements. We quickly told him what had happened. How Emma was taking a shower when I came in, how Ed called to her and she said she'd be right down, how we heard a crash and found her poor body. Then Ed went upstairs with him to talk with the chief. I couldn't bear to follow. Poor Emma. What a stupid way to die. I looked at my hands, which were still trembling. Some of Emma's blood was on the right one from when I'd touched her cheek for a second—my private farewell. Some had even gotten on my gold bracelet, the one Emma had given me years ago. I had given her the necklace she always wore. The jewelry was special to both of us. The only time I took mine off was when I . . . My God, I thought. This was wrong, all wrong. But how? I heard her. We were both down here.

My legs were shaking when I finally finished thinking things through and decided to go back upstairs. I tried to keep the tremor out of my voice. Don Turnbull is our police chief, and he's the most sexist son of a bitch I've ever met. Has been since he was in Ridgebeck High and couldn't get the time of day from any of the girls. Last thing I needed was his ignoring what I had to say as the rumblings of an hysterical woman.

"Don, can I talk with you? It's important."

"Now, Marge, I know this

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has been a shock. A terrible accident for poor Emma. But why don't you go downstairs and make yourself a cup of tea? This is no place for you."

"No, Don. This was no accident. This was murder."

"Marge, that don't make sense. Ed and Detective Simmons told me the whole story. You yourself said that Emma was up here alone when it happened. Now, why don't you let Ed take you down and see if Emma had a little sherry or something in the house." Ed tried to grab my arm, but I shook him off. Mustering as much self-control as I could, I repeated, "This is murder, Don. And I'm not going anywhere until you find the tape."

"What tape? What are you talking about?"

"She's just upset, chief," Ed said, and started to pull on me. That did it.

"Don Turnbull, I don't intend to let this young man get away with murder because you're so bullheaded. Now, I'm not movin' until your men search this upstairs for a tape."

Minutes later, Deputy Mike Harkind, Mary Harkind's eldest and smartest, appeared. "Chief, maybe this is what Ms. Feder is lookin' for." He held a black tape in his gloved hands. "Found it under Ms. Pilc's bed next to that fancy entertainment unit."

"Play it, Don. And I'll bet you the first thing you hear is running water. Then if you still can't figure out what it means, I'll be glad to tell you."

The tape was just as I'd expected: the water, poor Emma calling out, then the loud crash. Ed was a smart one, thought he knew women inside and out, but the day any man knows all there is to know about women is the day Don Turnbull reads *The Feminine Mystique*.

Still, it took over an hour before Don put two and two together and managed to come up with four instead of five or three. I give the Harkind boy a lot of credit for finally explaining it in terms even Don could understand.

As it was, I was still trying to help Emma's friends understand what had really happened for days afterwards. Even Tom came up to me after poor Emma's funeral and asked how I knew Ed had killed her.

"I can see his motive, Marge. Had her money in his account already. Surely didn't need her lookin' over his shoulder tellin' him how to invest it and making sure he split his profits with her. But it's the how of it I don't understand."

"A few sound effects can go a long way, Tom. All he did was lure her to the workout room after her shower and bash her on the head. Then, when I

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pulled up, he turned on the recorder so it sounded like the shower was on. Had it timed so when the shower went off she would say she was coming down a few minutes later. All he had to do was walk to the stairs and call up. I was his alibi."

"Sounds pretty foolproof to me. How did you catch on?"

"There isn't a woman alive who weighs herself unless she does the following things first," and I ticked them off with my fingers. "Remove every stitch of clothing she's wearing, remove all jewelry, dry her hair. And some even try to go the bathroom first."

"You're kidding. That's the silliest thing I ever heard of. Dry your hair? Why?"

"For the same reason you like to weigh yourself after a workout. When you work out, you sweat, which means you lose water. When your hair is wet, you have extra water on you. Water is heavy, about a pound a cup. Emma would never have weighed herself with soaking wet hair, and certainly not with that heavy gold necklace on, either. That's what I realized when I looked at my bracelet."

"That skinny little thing? Can't weigh more than a few ounces."

"You'll never understand women if you don't know that in the battle of the bulge any loss, no matter how small, is a major gain."

He was still thinking that one over when I left for my memorial one-hour walk in Emma's honor. When I was halfway done, the track team pulled up in front of me, so I finished it in less than an hour. But somehow I'm sure Emma would've understood.

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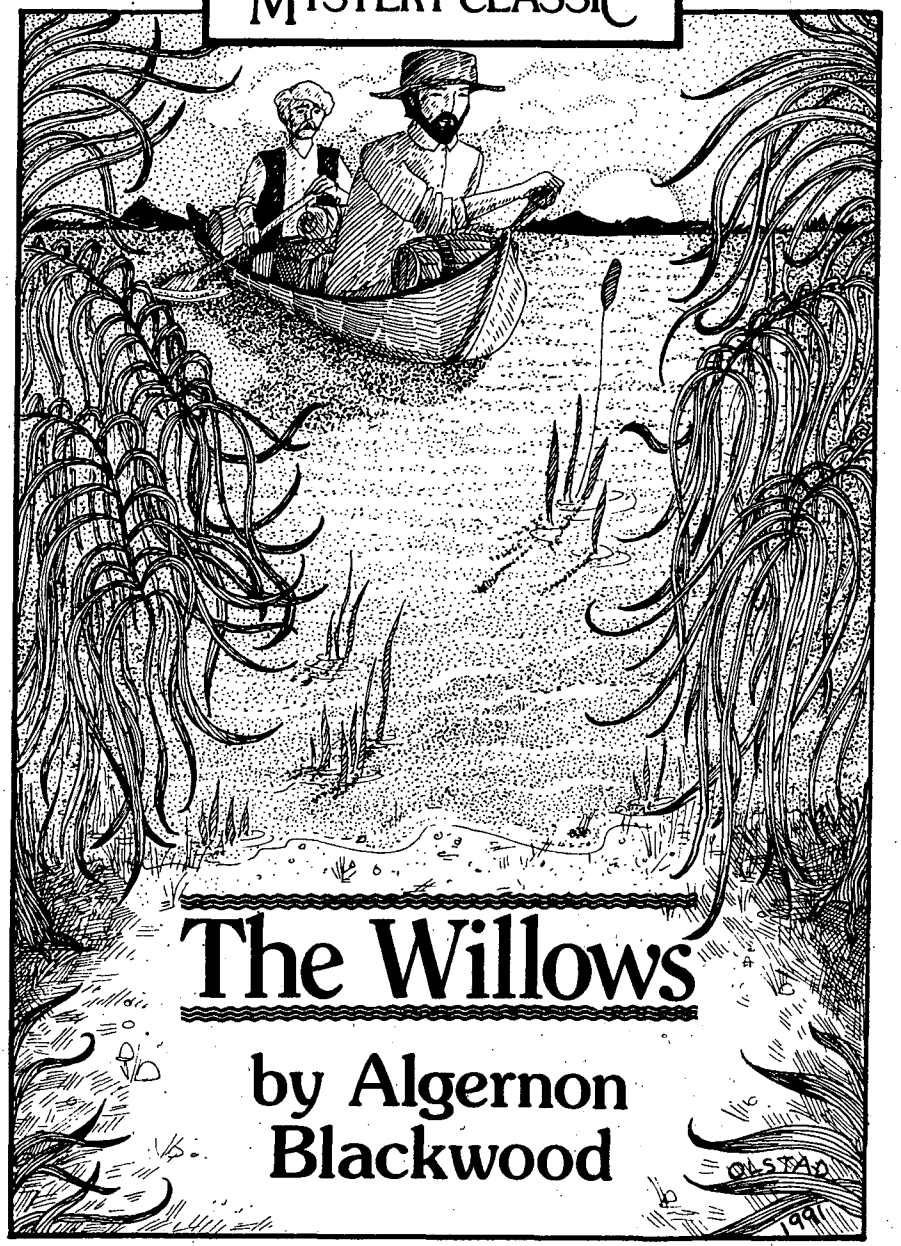
MYSTERY CLASSIC



The Willows

by Algernon Blackwood

Illustration by Patricia Olstad

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After leaving Vienna, and long before you come to Budapest, the Danube enters a region of singular loneliness and desolation, where its waters spread away on all sides regardless of a main channel, and the country becomes a swamp for miles upon miles, covered by a vast sea of low willow bushes. On the big maps this deserted area is painted in a fluffy blue, growing fainter in color as it leaves the banks, and across it may be seen in large straggling letters the word *Sümpfe,* meaning marshes.

In high flood this great acreage of sand, shingle beds, and willow-grown islands is almost topped by the water, but in normal seasons the bushes bend and rustle in the free winds, showing their silver leaves to the sunshine in an ever-moving plain of bewildering beauty. These willows never attain to the dignity of trees; they have no rigid trunks; they remain humble bushes, with rounded tops and soft outline, swaying on slender stems that answer to the least pressure of the wind; supple as grasses, and so continually shifting that they somehow give the impression that the entire plain is moving and alive. For the wind sends waves rising and falling over the whole surface, waves of leaves instead of waves of water, green swells like the sea, too, until the branches turn and lift, and then silvery white as their underside turns to the sun.

Happy to slip beyond the control of stern banks, the Danube here wanders about at will among the intricate network of channels intersecting the islands everywhere with broad avenues down which the waters pour with a shouting sound; making whirlpools, eddies, and foaming rapids; tearing at the sandy banks; carrying away masses of shore and willow clumps; and forming new islands innumerable which shift daily in size and shape and possess at best an impermanent life, since the floodtime obliterates their very existence.

Properly speaking, this fascinating part of the river's life begins soon after leaving Pressburg, and we, in our Canadian canoe, with gypsy tent and frying pan on board, reached it on the crest of a rising flood about mid-July. That very same morning, when the sky was reddening before sunrise, we had slipped swiftly through still-sleeping Vienna, leaving it a couple of hours later a mere patch of smoke against the blue hills of the Wienerwald on the horizon; we had breakfasted below and had then swept on the tearing current past Orth, Hainburg, Petronell (the old Roman Carnuntum of Marcus Aurelius), and so under the frowning heights of Theben on a spur of the Carpathians, where the March

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steals in quietly from the left and the frontier is crossed between Austria and Hungary.

Racing along at twelve kilometers an hour soon took us well into Hungary, and the muddy waters—sure sign of flood—sent us aground on many a shingle bed, and twisted us like a cork in many a sudden belching whirlpool before the towers of Pressburg (Hungarian, Poszony) showed against the sky; and then the canoe, leaping like a spirited horse, flew at top speed under the gray walls, negotiated safely the sunken chain of the Fliegende Brücke ferry, turned the corner sharply to the left, and plunged on yellow foam into the wilderness of islands, sandbanks, and swamp land beyond—the land of the willows.

The change came suddenly, as when a series of bioscope pictures snaps down on the streets of a town and shifts without warning into the scenery of lake and forest. We entered the land of desolation on wings, and in less than half an hour there was neither boat nor fishing hut nor red roof, nor any single sign of human habitation and civilization within sight. The sense of remoteness from the world of human kind, the utter isolation, the fascination of this singular world of willows, winds, and waters, instantly laid its spell upon us both, so that we allowed laughingly to one another that we ought by rights to have held some special kind of passport to admit us, and that we had, somewhat audaciously, come without asking leave into a separate little kingdom of wonder and magic—a kingdom that was reserved for the use of others who had a right to it, with everywhere unwritten warnings to trespassers, for those who had the imagination to discover them.

Though still early in the afternoon, the ceaseless buffetings of a most tempestuous wind made us feel weary, and we at once began casting about for a suitable camping ground for the night. But the bewildering character of the islands made landing difficult; the swirling flood carried us inshore and then swept us out again; the willow branches tore our hands as we seized them to stop the canoe, and we pulled many a yard of sandy bank into the water before at length we shot with a great sideways blow from the wind into a backwater and managed to beach the bows in a cloud of spray. Then we lay panting and laughing after our exertions on hot yellow sand, sheltered from the wind, and in the full blaze of a scorching sun, a cloudless blue sky above, and an immense army of dancing, shouting willow bushes, closing in from all sides, shining with spray and clapping their thousand little hands as though to ap-

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plaud the success of our efforts.

"What a river!" I said to my companion, thinking of all the way we had traveled from the source in the Black Forest, and how we had often been obliged to wade and push in the upper shallows at the beginning of June.

"Won't stand much nonsense now, will it?" he said, pulling the canoe a little farther into safety up the sand, and then composing himself for a nap.

I lay by his side, happy and peaceful in the bath of the elements—water, wind, sand, and the great fire of the sun—thinking of the long journey that lay behind us, and of the great stretch before us to the Black Sea, and how lucky I was to have such a delightful traveling companion as my friend, the Swede.

We had made many similar journeys together, but the Danube, more than any other river I knew, impressed us from the very beginning with its *aliveness*. From its tiny bubbling entry into the world among the pinewood gardens of Donaueschingen, until this moment when it began to play the great river-game of losing itself among the deserted swamps, unobserved, unrestrained, it had seemed to us like following the growth of some living creature. Sleepy at first, but later developing violent desires as it became conscious of its deep soul, it rolled, like some huge fluid being, through all the countries we had passed, holding our little craft on its mighty shoulders, playing roughly with us sometimes, yet always friendly and well-meaning, till at length we had come inevitably to regard it as a Great Personage.

How, indeed, could it be otherwise, since it told us so much of its secret life? At night we heard it singing to the moon as we lay in our tent, uttering that odd sibilant note peculiar to itself and said to be caused by the rapid tearing of the pebbles along its bed, so great is its hurrying speed. We knew, too, the voice of its gurgling whirlpools, suddenly bubbling up on a surface previously quite calm; the roar of its shallows and swift rapids; its constant steady thundering below all mere surface sounds; and that ceaseless tearing of its icy waters at the banks. How it stood up and shouted when the rains fell flat upon its face! And how its laughter roared out when the wind blew upstream and tried to stop its growing speed! We knew all its sounds and voices, its tumblings and foamings, its unnecessary splashing against the bridges; that self-conscious chatter when there were hills to look on; the affected dignity of speech when it passed through the little towns, far too important to laugh; and all these faint, sweet whisperings when the sun

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caught it fairly in some slow curve and poured down upon it till the steam rose.

It was full of tricks too, in its early life before the great world knew it. There were places in the upper reaches among the Swabian forests, when yet the first whispers of its destiny had not reached it, where it elected to disappear through holes in the ground, to appear again on the other side of the porous limestone hills and start a new river with another name; leaving too so little water in its own bed that we had to climb out and wade and push the canoe through miles of shallows.

And a chief pleasure, in those early days of its irresponsible youth, was to lie low, like Brer Fox, just before the little turbulent tributaries came to join it from the Alps, to refuse to acknowledge them, but to run for miles side by side, the dividing line well marked, the very levels different, the Danube declining to recognize the newcomer. Below Passau, however, it gave up this particular trick, for there the Inn comes in with a thundering power impossible to ignore, and so pushes and incommodes the parent river that there is hardly room for them in the long twisting gorge that follows, and the Danube is shoved this way and that against the cliffs, and forced to hurry itself with great waves and much dashing to and fro in order to get through in time. And during the fight our canoe slipped down from its shoulder to its breast, and had the time of its life among the struggling waves. But the Inn taught the old river a lesson, and after Passau it no longer pretended to ignore new arrivals.

This was many days back, of course, and since then we had come to know other aspects of the great creature, and across the Bavarian wheat plain of Straubing she wandered so slowly under the blazing June sun that we could well imagine only the surface inches were water, while below there moved, concealed as by a silken mantle, a whole army of Undines, passing silently and unseen down to the sea, and leisurely, lest they be discovered.

Much, too, we forbade her because of her friendliness to the birds and animals that haunted the shores. Cormorants lined the banks in lonely places in rows like short black palings; grey crows crowded the shinglebeds; storks stood fishing in the vistas of shallower water that opened up between the islands, and hawks, swans, and marsh birds of all sorts filled the air with glinting wings and singing, petulant cries. It was impossible to feel annoyed with the river's vagaries after seeing a deer leap with a splash into the water at sunrise and swim past the bows of the canoe; and

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often we saw fawns peering at us from the underbrush, or looked straight into the brown eyes of a stag as we charged full tilt round a corner and entered another reach of the river. Foxes, too, everywhere haunted the banks, tripping daintily among the driftwood and disappearing so suddenly that it was impossible to see how they managed it.

But now, after leaving Pressburg, everything changed a little, and the Danube became more serious. It ceased trifling. It was halfway to the Black Sea, within scenting distance almost of other, stranger countries where no tricks would be permitted or understood. It became suddenly grownup, claimed our respect, even our awe. It broke out into three arms, for one thing, that only met again a hundred kilometers farther down, and for a canoe there were no indications which one was intended to be followed.

"If you take a side channel," said the Hungarian officer we met in the Pressburg shop while buying provisions, "you may find yourselves, when the flood subsides, forty miles from anywhere, high and dry, and you may easily starve. There are no people, no farms, no fishermen. I warn you not to continue. The river, too, is still rising, and this wind will increase."

The rising river did not alarm us in the least, but the matter of being left high and dry by a sudden subsidence of the waters might be serious, and we had consequently laid in an extra stock of provisions. For the rest, the officer's prophecy held true, and the wind, blowing down a perfectly clear sky, increased steadily till it reached the dignity of a westerly gale.

It was earlier than usual when we camped, for the sun was a good hour or two from the horizon, and leaving my friend still asleep on the hot sand, I wandered about in desultory examination of our hotel. The island, I found, was less than an acre in extent, a mere sandy bank standing some two or three feet above the level of the river. The far end, pointing into the sunset, was covered with flying spray which the tremendous wind drove off the crests of the broken waves. It was triangular in shape, with the apex upstream.

I stood there for several minutes, watching the impetuous crimson flood bearing down with a shouting roar, dashing in waves against the bank as though to sweep it bodily away, and then swirling by in two foaming streams on either side. The ground seemed to shake with the shock and rush, while the furious movement of the willow bushes as the wind poured over them increased the curious illusion that the island itself actually moved. Above,

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for a mile or two, I could see the great river descending upon me; it was like looking up the slope of a sliding hill, white with foam, and leaping up everywhere to show itself to the sun.

The rest of the island was too thickly grown with willows to make walking pleasant, but I made the tour, nevertheless. From the lower end the light, of course, changed, and the river looked dark and angry. Only the backs of the flying waves were visible, streaked with foam, and pushed forcibly by the great shocks of wind that fell upon them from behind. For a short mile it was visible, pouring in and out among the islands, and then disappearing with a huge sweep into the willows, which closed about it like a herd of monstrous antediluvian creatures crowding down to drink. They made me think of gigantic spongelike growths that sucked the river up into themselves. They caused it to vanish from sight. They herded there together in such overpowering numbers.

Altogether it was an impressive scene, with its utter loneliness, its bizarre suggestions; and as I gazed, long and curiously, a singular emotion began to stir somewhere in the depths of me. Midway in my delight of the wild beauty, there crept, unbidden and unexplained, a curious feeling of disquietude.

A rising river, perhaps, always suggests something of the ominous; many of the little islands I saw before me would probably have been swept away by the morning; this resistless thundering flood of water touched the sense of awe. Yet I was aware that my uneasiness lay deeper far than the emotions of awe and wonder. It was not that I felt. Nor had it directly to do with the power of the driving wind—this spouting hurricane that might almost carry up a few acres of willows into the air and scatter them like so much chaff over the landscape. The wind was simply enjoying itself, for nothing rose out of the flat landscape to stop it, and I was conscious of sharing its great game with a kind of pleasurable excitement. Yet this novel emotion had nothing to do with the wind. Indeed, so vague was the sense of distress I experienced that it was impossible to trace it to its source and deal with it accordingly, though I was aware somehow that it had to do with my realization of our utter insignificance before this unrestrained power of the elements about me. The huge-grown river had something to do with it, too—a vague, unpleasant idea that we had somehow trifled with these great elemental forces in whose power we lay helpless every hour of the day and night. For here, indeed, they were gigantically at play together, and the sight appealed to the imagination.

But my emotion, so far as I could understand it, seemed to attach

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itself more particularly to the willow bushes, to these acres and acres of willows, crowding, so thickly growing there, swarming everywhere the eye could reach, pressing upon the river as though to suffocate it, standing in dense array mile after mile beneath the sky, watching, waiting, listening. And, apart quite from the elements, the willows connected themselves subtly with my malaise, attacking the mind insidiously somehow by reason of their vast numbers, and contriving in some way or other to represent to the imagination a new and mighty power, a power, moreover, not altogether friendly to us.

Great revelations of nature, of course, never fail to impress in one way or another, and I was no stranger to moods of the kind. Mountains overawe and oceans terrify, while the mystery of great forests exercises a spell peculiarly its own. But all these, at one point or another, somewhere link on intimately with human life and human experience. They stir comprehensible, even if alarming, emotions. They tend on the whole to exalt.

With this multitude of willows, however, it was something far different, I felt. Some essence emanated from them that besieged the heart. A sense of awe awakened, true, but of awe touched somewhere by a vague distress. Their serried ranks, growing everywhere darker about me as the shadows deepened, moving furiously yet softly in the wind, woke in me the curious and unwelcome suggestion that we had trespassed here upon the borders of an alien world, a world where we were intruders, a world where we were not wanted or invited to remain—where we ran risks perhaps.

The feeling, however, though it refused to yield its meaning entirely to analysis, did not at the time trouble me by passing into menace. Yet it never left me quite, even during the very practical business of putting up the tent in a hurricane of wind and building a fire for the stewpot. It remained, just enough to bother and perplex, and to rob a most delightful camping ground of a good portion of its charm. To my companion, however, I said nothing, for he was a man I considered devoid of imagination. In the first place, I could never have explained to him what I meant, and in the second, he would have laughed stupidly at me if I had.

There was a slight depression in the center of the island, and here we pitched the tent. The surrounding willows broke the wind a bit.

"A poor camp," observed the imperturbable Swede when at last the tent stood upright; "no stones and precious little firewood. I'm

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for moving on early tomorrow—eh? This sand won't hold anything."

But the experience of a collapsing tent at midnight had taught us many devices, and we made the cozy gypsy house as safe as possible and then set about collecting a store of wood to last till bedtime. Willow bushes drop no branches, and driftwood was our only source of supply. We hunted the shores pretty thoroughly. Everywhere the banks were crumbling as the rising flood tore at them and carried away great portions with a splash and a gurgle.

"The island's much smaller than when we landed," said the accurate Swede. "It won't last long at this rate. We'd better drag the canoe close to the tent, and be ready to start at a moment's notice. *I* shall sleep in my clothes."

He was a little distance off, climbing along the bank, and I heard his rather jolly laugh as he spoke.

"By jove!" I heard him call, a moment later, and turned to see what had caused his exclamation. But for the moment he was hidden by the willows, and I could not find him.

"What in the world is this?" I heard him cry again, and this time his voice had become serious.

I ran up quickly and joined him on the bank. He was looking over the river, pointing at something in the water.

"Good heavens, it's a man's body!" he cried excitedly. "Look!"

A black thing, turning over and over in the foaming waves, swept rapidly past. It kept disappearing and coming up to the surface again. It was about twenty feet from the shore, and just as it was opposite to where we stood it lurched round and looked straight at us. We saw its eyes reflecting the sunset, and gleaming an odd yellow as the body turned over. Then it gave a swift, gulping plunge, and dived out of sight in a flash.

"An otter, by gad!" we exclaimed in the same breath, laughing.

It *was* an otter, alive, and out on the hunt; yet it had looked exactly like the body of a drowned man turning helplessly in the current. Far below it came to the surface once again, and we saw its black skin, wet and shining in the sunlight.

Then, too, just as we turned back, our arms full of driftwood, another thing happened to recall us to the river bank. This time it really was a man, and what was more, a man in a boat. Now a small boat on the Danube was an unusual sight at any time, but here in this deserted region, and at floodtime, it was so unexpected as to constitute a real event. We stood and stared.

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Whether it was due to the slanting sunlight, or the refraction from the wonderfully illumined water, I cannot say, but whatever the cause, I found it difficult to focus my sight properly upon the flying apparition. It seemed, however, to be a man standing upright in a sort of flat-bottomed boat, steering with a long oar, and being carried down the opposite shore at a tremendous pace. He apparently was looking across in our direction, but the distance was too great and the light too uncertain for us to make out very plainly what he was about. It seemed to me that he was gesticulating and making signs at us. His voice came across the water to us shouting something furiously, but the wind drowned it so that no single word was audible. There was something curious about the whole appearance—man, boat, signs, voice—that made an impression on me out of all proportion to its cause.

"He's crossing himself!" I cried. "Look, he's making the sign of the cross!"

"I believe you're right," the Swede said, shading his eyes with his hand and watching the man out of sight. He seemed to be gone in a moment, melting away into the sea of willows where the sun caught them in the bend of the river and turned them into a great crimson wall of beauty. Mist, too, had begun to rise, so that the air was hazy.

"But what in the world is he doing at nightfall on this flooded river?" I said, half to myself. "Where is he going at such a time, and what did he mean by his signs and shouting? D'you think he wished to warn us about something?"

"He saw our smoke, and thought we were spirits probably," laughed my companion. "These Hungarians believe in all sorts of rubbish; you remember the shopwoman at Pressburg warning us that no one ever landed here because it belonged to some sort of beings outside man's world. I suppose they believe in fairies and elementals, possibly demons, too. That peasant in the boat saw people on the island for the first time in his life," he added, after a slight pause, "and it scared him, that's all."

The Swede's tone of voice was not convincing, and his manner lacked something that was usually there. I noted the change instantly while he talked, though without being able to label it precisely.

"If they had enough imagination," I laughed loudly—I remember trying to make as much noise as I could—"they might well people a place like this with the old gods of antiquity. The Romans must have haunted all this region more or less with their shrines and

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sacred groves and elemental deities."

The subject dropped and we returned to our stewpot, for my friend was not given to imaginative conversation as a rule. Moreover, just then I remember feeling distinctly glad that he was not imaginative; his stolid, practical nature suddenly seemed to me welcome, and comforting. It was an admirable temperament, I felt; he could steer down rapids like a red Indian, shoot dangerous bridges and whirlpools better than any white man I ever saw in a canoe. He was a grand fellow for an adventurous trip, a tower of strength when untoward things happened. I looked at his strong face and light curly hair as he staggered along under his pile of driftwood (twice the size of mine) and I experienced a feeling of relief. Yes, I was distinctly glad just then that the Swede was—what he was, and that he never made remarks that suggested more than they said.

"The river's still rising, though," he added, as if following out some thoughts of his own, and dropping his load with a gasp. "This island will be under water in two days if it goes on."

"I wish the wind would go down," I said, "I don't care a fig for the river."

The flood, indeed, had no terrors for us; we could get off at ten minutes' notice, and the more water the better we liked it. It meant an increasing current and the obliteration of the treacherous shingle beds that so often threatened to tear the bottom out of our canoe.

Contrary to our expectations, the wind did not go down with the sun. It seemed to increase with the darkness, howling overhead and shaking the willows round us like straws. Curious sounds accompanied it sometimes, like the explosion of heavy guns, and it fell upon the water and the island in great flat blows of immense power. It made me think of the sounds a planet must make, could we only hear it, driving along through space.

But the sky kept wholly clear of clouds, and soon after supper the big moon rose up in the east and covered the river and the plain of shouting willows with a light like the day.

We lay on the sandy patch beside the fire, smoking, listening to the noises of the night round us, and talking happily of the journey we had already made, and of our plans ahead. The map lay spread in the door of the tent, but the high wind made it hard to study, and presently we lowered the curtain and extinguished the lantern. The firelight was enough to smoke and see each other's faces by, and the sparks flew about overhead like fireworks. A few yards

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beyond the river gurgled and hissed, and from time to time a heavy splash announced the falling away of further portions of the bank.

Our talk, I noticed, had to do with the faraway scenes and incidents of our first camps in the Black Forest, or of other subjects altogether remote from the present setting, for neither of us spoke of the actual moment more than was necessary—almost as though we had agreed tacitly to avoid discussion of the camp and its incidents. Neither the otter nor the boatman, for instance, received the honor of a single mention, though ordinarily these would have furnished discussion for the greater part of the evening. They were, of course, distinct events in such a place.

The scarcity of wood made it a business to keep the fire going, for the wind that drove the smoke in our faces wherever we sat helped at the same time to make a forced draft. We took it in turns to make foraging expeditions into the darkness, and the quantity the Swede brought back always made me feel that he took an absurdly long time finding it; for the fact was I did not care much about being left alone, and yet it always seemed to be my turn to grub about among the bushes or scramble along the slippery banks in the moonlight. The long day's battle with wind and water—such wind and such water!—had tired us both, and an early bed was the obvious program. Yet neither of us made the move for the tent. We lay there, tending the fire, talking in desultory fashion, peering about us into the dense willow bushes, and listening to the thunder of wind and river. The loneliness of the place had entered our very bones, and silence seemed natural, for after a bit the sound of our voices became a trifle unreal and forced; whispering would have been the fitting mode of communication, I felt, and the human voice, always rather absurd amid the roar of the elements, now carried with it something almost illegitimate. It was like talking out loud in church, or in some place where it was not lawful, perhaps not quite safe, to be overheard.

The eeriness of this lonely island, set among a million willows, swept by a hurricane, and surrounded by hurrying deep waters, touched us both, I fancy. Untrodden by man, almost unknown to man, it lay there beneath the moon, remote from human influence, on the frontier of another world, an alien world, a world tenanted by willows only and the souls of willows. And we, in our rashness, had dared to invade it, even to make use of it. Something more than the power of its mystery stirred in me as I lay on the sand, feet to fire, and peered up through the leaves at the stars. For the last time I rose to get firewood.

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"When this has burned up," I said firmly, "I shall turn in." And my companion watched me lazily as I moved off into the surrounding shadows.

For an unimaginative man I thought he seemed unusually receptive that night, unusually open to suggestion of things other than sensory. He, too, was touched by the beauty and loneliness of the place. I was not altogether pleased, I remember, to recognize this slight change in him, and instead of immediately collecting sticks, I made my way to the far point of the island where the moonlight on plain and river could be seen to better advantage. The desire to be alone had come suddenly upon me; my former dread returned in force; there was a vague feeling in me I wished to face and probe to the bottom.

When I reached the point of sand jutting out among the waves, the spell of the place descended upon me with a positive shock. No mere "scenery" could have produced such an effect. There was something more here, something to disturb.

I gazed across the waste of wild waters; I watched the whispering willows; I heard the ceaseless beating of the tireless wind; and, one and all, each in its own way, stirred in me this sensation of a strange distress. But the willows especially; forever they went on chattering and talking among themselves, laughing a little, shrilly crying out, sometimes sighing—but what it was they made so much to-do about belonged to the secret life of the great plain they inhabited. And it was utterly alien to the world I knew, or to that of the wild yet kindly elements. They made me think of a host of beings from another plane of life, another evolution altogether, perhaps, all discussing a mystery known only to themselves. I watched them moving busily together, oddly shaking their big bushy heads, twirling their myriad leaves even when there was no wind. They moved of their own will as though alive, and they touched, by some incalculable method, my own keen sense of the unusual.

There they stood in the moonlight, like a vast army surrounding our camp, shaking their innumerable silver spears defiantly formed all ready for an attack.

The psychology of places, for some imaginations at least, is very vivid; for the wanderer, especially, camps have their "note" either of welcome or rejection. At first it may not always be apparent because the busy preparations of tent and cooking prevent, but with the first pause—after supper usually—it comes and announces itself. And the note of this willow-camp now became unmistakably plain to me; we were interlopers, trespassers; we were

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not welcomed. The sense of unfamiliarity grew upon me as I stood there watching. We touched the frontier of a region where our presence was resented. For a night's lodging we might perhaps be tolerated; but for a prolonged and inquisitive stay—no! by all the gods of the trees and the wilderness, no! We were the first human influences upon this island, and we were not wanted. *The willows were against us!*

Strange thoughts like these, bizarre fancies, borne I know not whence, found lodging in my mind as I stood listening. What, I thought, if after all, these crouching willows proved to be alive; if suddenly they should rise up, like a swarm of living creatures, marshaled by the gods whose territory we had invaded, sweep toward us off the vast swamps, booming overhead in the night—and then *settle down!* As I looked it was so easy to imagine they actually moved, crept nearer, retreated a little, huddled together in masses, hostile, waiting for the great wind that should finally start them a-running. I could have sworn their aspect changed a little, that their ranks deepened and pressed more closely together.

The melancholy shrill cry of a nightbird sounded overhead, and suddenly I nearly lost my balance as the piece of bank I stood upon fell with a great splash into the river, undermined by the flood. I stepped back just in time, and went on hunting for firewood again, half-laughing at the odd fancies that crowded so thickly into my mind and cast their spell upon me. I recalled the Swede's remark about moving on next day, and I was just thinking that I fully agreed with him, when I turned with a start and saw the subject of my thoughts standing immediately in front of me. He was quite close. The roar of the elements had covered his approach.

"You've been gone so long," he shouted above the wind, "I thought something must have happened to you."

But there was that in his tone, and a certain look in his face as well, that conveyed to me more than his actual words, and in a flash I understood the real reason for his coming. It was because the spell of the place had entered his soul too, and he did not like being alone.

"River still rising," he cried, pointing to the flood in the moonlight, "and the wind's simply awful!"

He always said the same things, but it was the cry for companionship that gave the real importance to his words.

"Lucky," I cried back, "our tent's in the hollow. I think it'll hold all night." I added something about the difficulty of finding wood,

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in order to explain my absence, but the wind caught my words and flung them across the river, so that he did not hear, but just looked at me through the branches, nodding his head.

"Lucky if we get away without disaster!" he shouted, or words to that effect; and I remember feeling half angry with him for putting the thought into words, for it was exactly what I felt myself. There was disaster impending somewhere, and the sense of presentiment lay unpleasantly upon me.

We went back to the fire and made a final blaze, poking it up with our feet. We took a last look round. But for the wind the heat would have been unpleasant. I put this thought into words, and I remember my friend's reply struck me oddly, that he would rather have the heat, the ordinary July weather, than this "diabolical wind."

Everything was snug for the night; the canoe lying turned over beside the tent, with both yellow paddles beneath her; the provisions hanging from a willow stem, and the washed-up dishes removed to a safe distance from the fire, all ready for the morning meal.

We smothered the embers of the fire with sand and then turned in. The flap of the tent door was up, and I saw the branches and the stars and the white moonlight. The shaking willows and the heavy buffetings of the wind against our taut little house were the last things I remembered as sleep came down and coaxed all with its soft and delicious forgetfulness.

II

Suddenly I found myself lying awake, peering from my sandy mattress through the door of the tent. I looked at my watch pinned against the canvas and saw by the bright moonlight that it was past twelve o'clock—the threshold of a new day—and I had therefore slept a couple of hours. The Swede was asleep still beside me; the wind howled as before; something plucked at my heart and made me feel afraid. There was a sense of disturbance in my immediate neighborhood.

I sat up quickly and looked out. The trees were swaying violently to and fro as the gusts smote them, but our little bit of green canvas lay snugly safe in the hollow, for the wind passed over it without meeting enough resistance to make it vicious. The feeling of disquietude did not pass, however, and I crawled quietly out of the tent to see if our belongings were safe. I moved carefully so as not to

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awaken my companion. A curious excitement was on me.

I was halfway out, kneeling on all fours, when my eyes first took in that the tops of the bushes opposite, with their moving tracery of leaves, made shapes against the sky. I sat back on my haunches and stared. It was incredible, surely, but there, opposite and slightly above me, were shapes of some indeterminate sort among the willows, and as the branches swayed in the wind they seemed to group themselves about these shapes, forming a series of monstrous outlines that shifted rapidly beneath the moon. Close, about fifty feet in front of me, I saw these things.

My first instinct was to waken my companion, that he too might see them, but something made me hesitate—the sudden realization, probably, that I should not welcome corroboration; and meanwhile I crouched there staring in amazement with smarting eyes. I was wide awake. I remember saying to myself that I was *not* dreaming.

They first became properly visible, these huge figures, just within the tops of the bushes—immense, bronze-colored, moving and wholly independent of the swaying of the branches. I saw them plainly and noted, now I came to examine them more calmly, that they were very much larger than human, and indeed that something in their appearance proclaimed them to be not human at all. Certainly they were not merely the moving tracery of the branches against the moonlight. They shifted independently. They rose upwards in a continuous stream from earth to sky, vanishing utterly as soon as they reached the dark of the sky. They were interlaced one with another, making a great column, and I saw their limbs and huge bodies melting in and out of each other, forming this serpentine line that bent and swayed and twisted spirally with the contortions of the wind-tossed trees. They were nude, fluid shapes, passing up the bushes within the leaves almost—rising up in a living column into the heavens. Their faces I never could see. Unceasingly they poured upwards, swaying in great bending curves, with a hue of dull bronze upon their skins.

I stared, trying to force every atom of vision from my eyes. For a long time I thought they must every moment disappear and resolve themselves into the movements of the branches and prove to be an optical illusion. I searched everywhere for a proof of reality, when all the while I understood quite well that the standard of reality had changed. For the longer I looked the more certain I became that these figures were real and living, though perhaps not according to the standards that the camera and the biologist

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would insist upon.

Far from feeling fear, I was possessed with a sense of awe and wonder such as I have never known. I seemed to be gazing at the personified elemental forces of this haunted and primeval region. Our intrusion had stirred the powers of the place into activity. It was we who were the cause of the disturbance, and my brain filled to bursting with stories and legends of the spirits and deities of places that have been acknowledged and worshiped by men in all ages of the world's history. But before I could arrive at any possible explanation, something impelled me to go farther out, and I crept forward on to the sand and stood upright. I felt the ground still warm under my bare feet; the wind tore at my hair and face; and the sound of the river burst upon my ears with a sudden roar. These things, I knew, were real, and proved that my senses were acting normally. Yet the figures still rose from earth to heaven, silent, majestically, in a great spiral of grace and strength that overwhelmed me at length with a genuine deep emotion of worship. I felt that I must fall down and worship—absolutely worship.

Perhaps in another minute I might have done so, when a gust of wind swept against me with such force that it blew me sideways, and I nearly stumbled and fell. It seemed to shake the dream violently out of me. At least it gave me another point of view somehow. The figures still remained, still ascended into heaven from the heart of the night, but my reason at last began to assert itself. It must be a subjective experience, I argued—nonetheless real for that, but still subjective. The moonlight and the branches combined to work out these pictures upon the mirror of my imagination, and for some reason I projected them outwards and made them appear objective. I knew this must be the case, of course. I was the subject of a vivid and interesting hallucination. I took courage, and began to move forward across the open patches of sand. By jove, though, was it all hallucination? Was it merely subjective? Did not any reason argue in the old futile way from the little standard of the known?

I only know that great column of figures ascended darkly into the sky for what seemed a very long period of time, and with a very complete measure of reality as most men are accustomed to gauge reality. Then suddenly they were gone.

And, once they were gone and the immediate wonder of their great presence had passed, fear came down upon me with a cold rush. The esoteric meaning of this lonely and haunted region suddenly flamed up within me, and I began to tremble. I took a quick

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look round—a look of horror that came near to panic—calculating vainly ways of escape; and then, realizing how helpless I was to achieve anything really effective, I crept back silently into the tent and lay down again upon my sandy mattress, first lowering the door curtain to shut out the sight of the willows in the moonlight, and then burying my head as deeply as possible beneath the blankets to deaden the sound of the terrifying wind.

III

As though further to convince me that I had not been dreaming, I remembered that it was a long time before I fell again into a troubled and restless sleep; and even then only the upper crust of me slept, and underneath there was something that never quite lost consciousness, but lay alert and on the watch.

But this second time I jumped up with a genuine start of terror. It was neither the wind nor the river that woke me, but the slow approach of something that caused the sleeping portion of me to grow smaller and smaller till at last it vanished altogether, and I found myself sitting bolt upright—listening.

Outside there was a sound of multitudinous little patterings. They had been coming, I was aware, for a long time, and in my sleep they had first become audible. I sat there nervously wide awake as though I had not slept at all. It seemed to me that my breathing came with difficulty, and that there was a great weight upon the surface of my body. In spite of the hot night, I felt clammy with cold and shivered. Something surely was pressing steadily against the sides of the tent and weighing down upon it from above. Was it the body of the wind? Was this the pattering of rain, the dripping of the leaves? The spray blown from the river by the wind and gathering in big drops? I thought quickly of a dozen things.

Then suddenly the explanation leaped into my mind; a bough from the poplar, the only large tree on the island, had fallen with the wind. Still half-caught by the other branches, it would fall with the next gust and crush us, and meanwhile its leaves brushed and tapped upon the tight canvas surface of the tent. I raised the loose flap and rushed out, calling to the Swede to follow.

But when I got out and stood upright I saw that the tent was free. There was no hanging bough; there was no rain or spray; nothing approached.

A cold, grey light filtered down through the bushes, and lay on the faintly gleaming sand. Stars still crowded the sky directly

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overhead, and the wind howled magnificently, but the fire no longer gave out any glow, and I saw the east reddening in streaks through the trees. Several hours must have passed since I stood there before watching the ascending figures, and the memory of it now came back to me horribly, like an evil dream. Oh, how tired it made me feel, that ceaseless raging wind! Yet, though the lassitude of a broken night was on me, my nerves were tingling with the activity of an equally tireless apprehension, and all idea of repose was out of the question. The river I saw had risen further. Its thunder filled the air, and a fine spray made itself felt through my thin sleeping shirt.

Yet nowhere did I discover the slightest evidences of anything to cause alarm. This deep, prolonged disturbance in my heart remained wholly unaccounted for.

My companion had not stirred when I called him, and there was no need to waken him now. I looked about me carefully, noting everything: the turned-over canoe; the yellow paddles—two of them, I'm certain; the provision sack and the extra lantern hanging together from the tree; and, crowding everywhere about me, enveloping all, the willows, those endless, shaking willows. A bird uttered its morning cry, and a string of ducks passed with whirring flight overhead in the twilight. The sand whirled, dry and stinging, about my bare feet in the wind.

I walked round the tent and then went out a little way into the bush, so that I could see across the river to the farther landscape, and the same profound yet indefinable emotion of distress seized upon me again as I saw the interminable sea of bushes stretching to the horizon, looking ghostly and unreal in the wan light of dawn. I walked softly here and there, still puzzling over that odd sound of infinite pattering, and of that pressure upon the tent that had awakened me. It must have been the wind, I reflected—the wind beating upon the loose, hot sand, driving the dry particles smartly against the taut canvas—the wind dropping heavily upon our fragile roof.

Yet all the time my nervousness and malaise increased appreciably.

I crossed over to the farther shore and noted how the coastline had altered in the night, and what masses of sand the river had torn away. I dipped my hands and feet into the cool current, and bathed my forehead. Already there was a glow of sunrise in the sky and the exquisite freshness of coming day. On my way back I passed purposely beneath the very bushes where I had seen the

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column of figures rising into the air, and midway among the clumps I suddenly found myself overtaken by a sense of vast terror. From the shadows a large figure went swiftly by. Someone passed me, as sure as ever man did. . . .

It was a great staggering blow from the wind that helped me forward again, and once out in the more open space, the sense of terror diminished strangely. The winds were about and walking, I remember saying to myself; for the winds often move like great presences under the trees. And altogether the fear that hovered about me was such an unknown and immense kind of fear, so unlike anything I had ever felt before, that it woke a sense of awe and wonder in me that did much to counteract its worst effects; and when I reached a high point in the middle of the island from which I could see the wide stretch of river, crimson in the sunrise, the whole magical beauty of it all was so overpowering that a sort of wild yearning woke in me and almost brought a cry up into the throat.

But this cry found no expression, for as my eyes wandered from the plain beyond to the island round me and noted our little tent half hidden among the willows, a dreadful discovery leaped out at me, compared to which my terror of the walking winds seemed as nothing at all.

For a change, I thought, had somehow come about in the arrangement of the landscape. It was not that my point of vantage gave me a different view, but that an alteration had apparently been affected in the relation of the tent to the willows, and of the willows to the tent. Surely the bushes now crowded much closer—unnecessarily, unpleasantly close. *They had moved nearer!*

Creeping with silent feet over the shifting sands, drawing imperceptibly nearer by soft, unhurried movements, the willows had come closer during the night. But had the wind moved them, or had they moved of themselves? I recalled the sound of infinite small patterings and the pressure upon the tent and upon my own heart, that caused me to wake in terror. I swayed for a moment in the wind like a tree, finding it hard to keep my upright position on the sandy hillock. There was a suggestion here of personal agency, of deliberate intention, of aggressive hostility, and it terrified me into a sort of rigidity.

Then the reaction followed quickly. The idea was so bizarre, so absurd, that I felt inclined to laugh. But the laughter came no more readily than the cry, for the knowledge that my mind was so receptive to such dangerous imaginings brought the additional

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terror that it was through our minds and not through our physical bodies that the attack would come, and was coming.

The wind buffeted me about, and very quickly it seemed, the sun came up over the horizon, for it was after four o'clock, and I must have stood on the little pinnacle of sand longer than I knew, afraid to come down at close quarters with the willows. I returned quietly, creepily, to the tent, first taking another exhaustive look round and—yes, I confess it—making a few measurements. I paced out on the warm sand the distances between the willows and the tent, making a note of the shortest distance particularly.

I crawled stealthily into my blankets. My companion, to all appearances, still slept soundly, and I was glad that this was so. Provided my experiences were not corroborated, I could find strength somehow to deny them, perhaps. With the daylight I could persuade myself that it was all a subjective hallucination, a fantasy of the night, a projection of the excited imagination.

Nothing further came to disturb me, and I fell asleep almost at once, utterly exhausted, yet still in dread of hearing again that weird sound of multitudinous pattering, or of feeling the pressure upon my heart that had made it difficult to breathe.

IV

The sun was high in the heavens when my companion woke me from a heavy sleep and announced that the porridge was cooked and there was just time to bathe. The grateful smell of frizzling bacon entered the tent door.

"River still rising," he said, "and several islands out in midstream have disappeared altogether. Our own island's much smaller."

"Any wood left?" I asked sleepily.

"The wood and the island will finish tomorrow in a dead heat," he laughed, "but there's enough to last us till then."

I plunged in from the point of the island, which had indeed alt[illegible] a lot in size and shape during the night, and was swept dow[illegible]n in a moment to the landing place opposite the tent. The water was icy, and the banks flew by like the country from an express train. Bathing under such conditions was an exhilarating operation, and the terror of the night seemed cleansed out of me by a process of evaporation in the brain. The sun was blazing hot; not a cloud showed itself anywhere; the wind, however, had not abated one little jot.

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Quite suddenly then the implied meaning of the Swede's words flashed across me, showing that he no longer wished to leave post-haste, and had changed his mind. "Enough to last till tomorrow"—he assumed we should stay on the island another night. It struck me as odd. The night before he was so positive the other way. How had the change come about?

Great crumblings of the banks occurred at breakfast, with heavy splashings and clouds of spray which the wind brought into our frying pan, and my fellow traveler talked incessantly about the difficulty the Vienna-Pest steamers must have to find the channel in flood. But the state of his mind interested and impressed me far more than the state of the river or the difficulties of the steamers. He had changed somehow since the evening before. His manner was different—a trifle excited, a trifle shy, with a sort of suspicion about his voice and gestures. I hardly know how to describe it now in cold blood, but at the time I remember being quite certain of one thing, viz., that he had become frightened.

He ate very little breakfast, and for once omitted to smoke his pipe. He had the map spread open beside him and kept studying its markings.

"We'd better get off sharp in an hour," I said presently, feeling for an opening that must bring him indirectly to a partial confession at any rate. And his answer puzzled me uncomfortably: "Rather! If they'll let us."

"Who'll let us? The elements?" I asked quickly, with affected indifference.

"The powers of this awful place, whoever they be," he replied, keeping his eyes on the map. "The gods are here, if they are anywhere at all in the world."

"The elements are always the true immortals," I replied, laughing as naturally as I could manage, yet knowing quite well that my face reflected my true feelings when he looked up gravely at me and spoke across the smoke:

"We shall be fortunate if we get away without further disaster."

This was exactly what I had dreaded, and I screwed myself up to the point of the direct question. It was like agreeing to allow the dentist to extract the tooth; it had to come anyhow in the long run, and the rest was all pretense.

"Further disaster! Why, what's happened?"

"For one thing—the steering paddle's gone," he said quietly.

"The steering paddle gone!" I repeated, greatly excited, for this was our rudder, and the Danube in flood without a rudder was

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suicide. "But what—"

"And there's a tear in the bottom of the canoe," he added, with a genuine little tremor in his voice.

I continued staring at him, able only to repeat the words in his face somewhat foolishly. There, in the heat of the sun, and on the burning sand, I was aware of a freezing atmosphere descending round us. I got up to follow him, for he merely nodded his head gravely and led the way towards the tent a few yards on the other side of the fireplace. The canoe still lay there as I had last seen her in the night, ribs uppermost, the paddles, or rather, *the* paddle, on the sand beside her.

"There's only one," he said, stooping to pick it up. "And here's the rent in the baseboard."

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him that I had clearly noticed *two* paddles a few hours before, but a second impulse made me think better of it, and I said nothing. I approached to see.

There was a long, finely-made tear in the bottom of the canoe where a little slither of wood had been neatly taken clean out; it looked as if the tooth of a sharp rock or snag had eaten down her length, and investigation showed that the hole went through. Had we launched her without observing it we must inevitably have foundered. At first the water would have made the wood swell so as to close the hole, but once out in midstream the water must have poured in, and the canoe, never more than two inches above the surface, would have filled and sunk very rapidly.

"There, you see, an attempt to prepare a victim for the sacrifice," I heard him saying, more to himself than to me, "two victims rather," he added as he bent over and ran his fingers along the slit.

I began to whistle—a thing I always do unconsciously when utterly nonplussed—and purposely paid no attention to his words. I was determined to consider them foolish.

"It wasn't there last night," he said presently, straightening, up from his examination and looking anywhere but at me.

"We must have scratched her in landing, of course," I stopped whistling to say. "The stones are very sharp—"

I stopped abruptly, for at that moment he turned round and met my eye squarely. I knew just as well as he did how impossible my explanation was. There were no stones, to begin with.

"And then there's this to explain, too," he added quietly, handing me the paddle and pointing to the blade.

A new and curious emotion spread freezingly over me as I took

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and examined it. The blade was scraped down all over, beautifully scraped, as though someone had sandpapered it with care, making it so thin that the first vigorous stroke must have snapped it off at the elbow.

"One of us walked in his sleep and did this thing," I said feebly, "or—or it has been filed by the constant stream of sand particles blown against it by the winds, perhaps."

"Ah," said the Swede, turning away, laughing a little, "you can explain everything!"

"The same wind that caught the steering paddle, and flung it so near the bank that it fell in with the next lump that crumbled," I called out after him, absolutely determined to find an explanation for everything he showed me.

Once alone with these perplexing evidences of personal agency, I think my first thought took the form of "One of us must have done this thing, and it certainly was not I." But my second thought decided how impossible it was to suppose, under all the circumstances, that either of us had done it. That my companion, the trusted friend of a dozen similar expeditions, could have knowingly had a hand in it, was a suggestion not to be entertained for a moment. Equally absurd seemed the explanation that this imperturbable and densely practical nature had suddenly become insane and was busied with insane purposes.

Yet the fact remained that what disturbed me most and kept my fear actively alive even in this blaze of sunshine and wild beauty was the clear certainty that some curious alteration had come about in his mind—that he was nervous, timid, suspicious, aware of goings on he did not speak about, watching a series of secret and hitherto unmentionable events—waiting, in a word, for a climax that he expected, and, I thought, expected very soon. This grew up in my mind intuitively—I hardly knew how.

I made a hurried examination of the tent and its surroundings, but the measurements of the night remained the same. There were deep hollows formed in the sand, I now noticed for the first time, basin-shaped and of various depths and sizes, varying from that of a teacup to a large bowl. The wind, no doubt, was responsible for these miniature craters, just as it was for lifting the paddle and tossing it towards the water. The rent in the canoe was the only thing that seemed quite inexplicable; and after all, it was conceivable that a sharp point had caught it when we landed. The examination I made of the shore did not assist this theory, but all the same I clung to it with that diminishing portion of my intelligence

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which I called my "reason." An explanation of some kind was an absolute necessity, just as some working explanation of the universe is necessary—however absurd—to the happiness of every individual who seeks to do his duty in the world and face the problems of life. The simile seemed to me at the time an exact parallel.

I at once set the pitch melting, and presently the Swede joined me at the work, though under the best conditions in the world the canoe could not be safe for traveling till the following day. I drew his attention casually to the hollows in the sand.

"Yes," he said, "I know. They're all over the island. But *you* can explain them, no doubt!"

"Wind, of course," I answered without hesitation. "Have you never watched those little whirlwinds in the street that twist and twirl everything into a circle? This sand's loose enough to yield, that's all."

He made no reply, and we worked on in silence for a bit. I watched him surreptitiously all the time, and I had an idea he was watching me. He seemed, too, to be always listening attentively to something I could not hear or perhaps for something that he expected to hear, for he kept turning about and staring into the bushes, and up into the sky, and out across the water where it was visible through the openings among the willows. Sometimes he even put his hand to his ear and held it there for several minutes. He said nothing to me, however, about it, and I asked no questions. And meanwhile, as he mended that torn canoe with the skill and address of a red Indian, I was glad to notice his absorption in the work, anon there was a vague dread in my heart that he would speak of the changed aspect of the willows. And, if he had noticed *that,* my imagination could no longer be held a sufficient explanation of it.

At length, after a long pause, he began to talk.

"Queer thing," he added in a hurried sort of voice, as though he wanted to say something and get it over. "Queer thing, I mean, about that otter last night."

I had expected something so totally different that he caught me with surprise, and I looked up sharply.

"Shows how lonely this place is. Otters are awfully shy things—"

"I don't mean that, of course," he interrupted. "I mean—do you think—did you think it really *was* an otter?"

"What else, in the name of Heaven, what else?"

"You know, I saw it before you did, and at first it seemed—so

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much bigger than an otter."

"The sunset as you looked upstream magnified it, or something," I replied.

He looked at me absently a moment, as though his mind were busy with other thoughts.

"It had such extraordinary yellow eyes," he went on half to himself.

"That was the sun, too," I laughed, a trifle boisterously. "I suppose you'll wonder next if that fellow in the boat—"

I suddenly decided not to finish the sentence. He was in the act of listening, turning his head to the wind, and something in the expression of his face made me halt. The subject dropped, and we went on with our caulking. Apparently he had not noticed my unfinished sentence. Five minutes later, however, he looked at me across the canoe, the smoking pitch in his hand, his face exceedingly grave.

"I *did* rather wonder, if you want to know," he said slowly, "what the thing in the boat was. I remember thinking at the time it was not a man. The whole business seemed to rise quite suddenly out of the water."

I laughed again boisterously in his face, but this time there was impatience, and a strain of anger too, in my feeling.

"Look here now," I cried, "this place is quite queer enough without going out of our way to imagine things. That boat was an ordinary boat, and the man in it was an ordinary man, and they were both going downstream as fast as they could lick. And that otter *was* an otter, so don't let's play the fool about it!"

He looked steadily at me with the same grave expression. He was not in the least annoyed. I took courage from his silence.

"And for heaven's sake," I went on, "don't keep pretending you hear things, because it only gives me the jumps, and there's nothing to hear but the river and this cursed old thundering wind."

"You fool!" he answered in a low, shocked voice, "you utter fool. That's just the way all victims talk. As if you didn't understand just as well as I do!" he sneered with scorn in his voice, and a sort of resignation. "The best thing you can do is to keep quiet and try to hold your mind as firm as possible. This feeble attempt at self-deception only makes the truth harder when you're forced to meet it."

My little effort was over, and I found nothing more to say, for I knew quite well his words were true, and that *I* was the fool, not he. Up to a certain stage in the adventure he kept ahead of me

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easily, and I think I felt annoyed to be out of it, to be thus proved less sensitive than himself to these extraordinary happenings, and half ignorant all the time of what was going on under my very nose. He knew from the very beginning, apparently. But at the moment I wholly missed the point of his words about the necessity of there being a victim, and that we ourselves were destined to satisfy the want. I dropped all pretense thenceforward, but thenceforward likewise my fear increased steadily to the climax.

"But you're quite right about one thing," he added, before the subject passed, "and that is that we're wiser not to talk about it, or even to think about it, because what one thinks finds expression in words, and what one says, happens."

That afternoon, while the canoe dried and hardened, we spent trying to fish, testing the leak, collecting wood, and watching the enormous flood of rising water. Masses of driftwood swept near our shores sometimes, and we fished for them with long willow branches. The island grew perceptibly smaller as the banks were torn away with great gulps and splashes. The weather kept brilliantly fine till about four o'clock, and then for the first time for three days the wind showed signs of abating. Clouds began to gather in the southwest, spreading thence slowly over the sky.

This lessening of the wind came as a great relief, for the incessant roaring, banging, and thundering had irritated our nerves. Yet the silence that came about five o'clock with its sudden cessation was in a manner quite as oppressive. The booming of the river had everything its own way then: it filled the air with deep murmurs, more musical than the wind noises, but infinitely more monotonous. The wind held many notes, rising, falling, always beating out some sort of great elemental tune; whereas the river's song lay between three notes at most—dull pedal notes, that held a lugubrious quality foreign to the wind, and that seemed to me, in my then nervous state, to sound wonderfully well the music of doom.

It was extraordinary, too, how the withdrawal suddenly of bright sunlight took everything out of the landscape that made for cheerfulness; and since this particular landscape had already managed to convey the suggestion of something sinister, the change of course was all the more unwelcome and noticeable. For me, I know, the darkening outlook became distinctly more alarming, and I found myself more than once calculating how soon after sunset the moon would get up in the east, and whether the gathering clouds would greatly interfere with her lighting of the little island.

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With this general hush of the wind—though it still indulged in occasional brief gusts—the river seemed to me to grow blacker, the willows to stand more densely together. The latter, too, kept up a sort of independent movement of their own, rustling among themselves even when no wind stirred, and shaking oddly from the roots upwards. When common objects in this way become charged with the suggestion of horror, they stimulate the imagination far more than things of unusual appearance; and these bushes, crowding huddled about us, assumed for me in the darkness a bizarre appearance that lent to them somehow the aspect of purposeful and living creatures. Their very ordinariness, I felt, masked what was malignant and hostile to us. The forces of the region drew nearer with the coming of night. They were focusing upon our island, and more particularly upon ourselves. For thus, somehow, in the terms of the imagination, did my really indescribable sensations in this extraordinary place present themselves.

I had slept a good deal in the early afternoon, and had thus recovered somewhat from the exhaustion of a disturbed night, but this only served apparently to render me more susceptible than before to the obsessing spell. I fought against it, laughing at my feelings as absurd and childish, with very obvious physiological explanations, yet, in spite of every effort, they gained in strength so that I dreaded the night as a child lost in a forest must dread the approach of darkness.

The canoe we had carefully covered with a waterproof sheet during the day, and the one remaining paddle had been securely tied by the Swede to the base of a tree, lest the wind should rob us of that too. From five o'clock onwards I busied myself with the stewpot and preparations for dinner, it being my turn to cook that night. We had potatoes, onions, bits of bacon fat to add flavor, and a general thick residue from former stews at the bottom of the pot; with black bread broken up into it the result was most excellent, and it was followed by a stew of plums with sugar and a brew of strong tea with dried milk. A good pile of wood lay close at hand, and the absence of wind made my duties easy. My companion sat lazily watching me, dividing his attentions between cleaning his pipe and giving useless advice—an admitted privilege of the off-duty man. He had been very quiet all the afternoon, engaged in recaulking the canoe, strengthening the tent ropes, and fishing for driftwood while I slept. No more talk about undesirable things had passed between us, and I think his only remarks had to do with the gradual destruction of the island, which he declared was now

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fully a third smaller than when we first landed.

The pot had just begun to bubble when I heard his voice calling to me from the bank, where he had wandered away without my noticing. I ran up.

"Come and listen," he said, "and see what you make of it." He held his hand cupwise to his ear, as so often before.

"Do you hear anything?" he asked, watching me curiously.

We stood there, listening attentively together. At first I heard only the deep note of the water and the hissings rising from its turbulent surface. The willows, for once, were motionless and silent. Then a sound began to reach my ears faintly, a peculiar sound—something like the humming of a distant gong. It seemed to come across to us in the darkness from the waste of swamps and willows opposite. It was repeated at regular intervals, but it was certainly neither the sound of a bell nor the hooting of a distant steamer. I can liken it to nothing so much as to the sound of an immense gong, suspended far up in the sky, repeating incessantly its muffled metallic note, soft and musical, as it was repeatedly struck. My heart quickened as I listened.

"I've heard it all day," said my companion. "While you slept this afternoon it came all round the island. I hunted it down, but could never get near enough to see—to localize it correctly. Sometimes it was overhead, and sometimes it seemed under the water. Once or twice, too, I could have sworn it was not outside at all, but within myself—you know—the way a sound in the fourth dimension is supposed to come."

I was too much puzzled to pay much attention to his words. I listened carefully, striving to associate it with any known familiar sound I could think of, but without success. It changed in direction, too, coming nearer, and then sinking utterly away into remote distance. I cannot say that it was ominous in quality, because to me it seemed distinctly musical, yet I must admit it set going a distressing feeling that made me wish I had never heard it.

"The wind blowing in those sand funnels," I said, determined to find an explanation, "or the bushes rubbing together after the storm, perhaps."

"It comes off the whole swamp," my friend answered. "It comes from everywhere at once." He ignored my explanations. "It comes from the willow bushes somehow—"

"But now the wind has dropped," I objected. "The willows can hardly make a noise by themselves, can they?"

His answer frightened me, first because I had dreaded it, and

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secondly, because I knew intuitively it was true.

"It is *because* the wind has dropped we now hear it. It was drowned before. It is the cry, I believe, of the—"

I dashed back to the fire, warned by a sound of bubbling that the stew was in danger, but determined at the same time to escape from further conversation. I was resolute, if possible, to avoid the exchanging of views. I dreaded, too, that he would begin again about the gods, or the elemental forces, or something else disquieting, and I wanted to keep myself well in hand for what might happen later. There was another night to be faced before we escaped from this distressing place, and there was no knowing yet what it might bring forth.

"Come and cut up bread for the pot," I called to him, vigorously stirring the appetizing mixture. That stew pot held sanity for us both, and the thought made me laugh.

He came over slowly and took the provision sack from the tree, fumbling in its mysterious depths, and then emptying the entire contents upon the ground-sheet at his feet.

"Hurry up!" I cried; "it's boiling."

The Swede burst out into a roar of laughter that startled me. It was forced laughter, not artificial exactly, but mirthless.

"There's nothing here!" he shouted, holding his sides.

"Bread, I mean."

"It's gone. There is no bread. It's been taken!"

I dropped the long spoon and ran up. Everything the sack had contained lay upon the ground sheet, but there was no loaf.

The whole dead weight of my growing fear fell upon me and shook me. Then I burst out laughing, too. It was the only thing to do; and the sound of my own laughter also made me understand his. The strain of psychical pressure caused it—this explosion of unnatural laughter in both of us; it was an effort of repressed forces to seek relief; it was a temporary safety valve. And with both of us it ceased quite suddenly.

"How criminally stupid of me!" I cried, still determined to be consistent and find an explanation. "I clean forgot to buy a loaf at Pressburg. That chattering woman put everything out of my head, and I must have left it lying on the counter or—"

"The oatmeal, too, is much less than it was this morning," the Swede interrupted.

Why in the world need he draw attention to it? I thought angrily.

"There's enough for tomorrow," I said, stirring vigorously, "and we can get lots more at Komorn or Gran. In twenty-four hours we

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shall be miles from here."

"I hope so—to God," he muttered, putting the things back into the sack, "unless we're claimed first as victims for the sacrifice," he added with a foolish laugh. He dragged the sack into the tent, for safety's sake, I suppose, and I heard him mumbling on to himself, but so indistinctly that it seemed quite natural for me to ignore his words.

Our meal was beyond question a gloomy one, and we ate it almost in silence, avoiding one another's eyes and keeping the fire bright. Then we washed up and prepared for the night, and, once smoking, our minds unoccupied with any definite duties, the apprehension I had felt all day long became more and more acute. It was not then active fear, I think, but the very vagueness of its origin distressed me far more than if I had been able to ticket and face it squarely. The curious sound I have likened to the note of a gong became now almost incessant, and filled the stillness of the night with a faint, continuous ringing rather than a series of distinct notes. At one time it was behind and at another time in front of us. Sometimes I fancied it came from the bushes on our left, and then again from the clumps on our right. More often it hovered directly overhead like the whirring of wings. It was really everywhere at once, behind, in front, at our sides and over our heads, completely surrounding us. The sound really defies description. But nothing within my knowledge is like that ceaseless muffled humming rising off the deserted world of swamps and willows.

We sat smoking in comparative silence, the strain growing every minute greater. The worst feature of the situation seemed to me that we did not know what to expect, and could therefore make no sort of preparation by way of defense. We could anticipate nothing. My explanations made in the sunshine, moreover, now came to haunt me with their foolish and wholly unsatisfactory nature, and it was more and more clear to us that some kind of plain talk with my companion was inevitable, whether I liked it or not. After all, we had to spend the night together, and to sleep in the same tent side by side. I saw that I could not get along much longer without the support of his mind, and for that, of course, plain talk was imperative. As long as possible, however, I postponed this little climax, and tried to ignore or laugh at the occasional sentences he flung into the emptiness.

Some of these sentences, moreover, were confoundedly disquieting to me, coming as they did to corroborate much that I felt myself; corroboration, too—which made it so much more convincing—from

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a totally different point of view. He composed such curious sentences, and hurled them at me in such an inconsequential sort of way, as though his main line of thought was secret to himself, and these fragments were the bits he found it impossible to digest. He got rid of them by uttering them. Speech relieved him. It was like being sick.

"There are things about us, I'm sure, that make for disorder, disintegration, destruction, *our* destruction," he said once, while the fire blazed between us. "We've strayed out of a safe line somewhere."

And another time, when the gong sounds had come nearer, ringing much louder than before, and directly over our heads, he said, as though talking to himself:

"I don't think a phonograph would show any record of that. The sound doesn't come to me by the ears at all. The vibrations reach me in another manner altogether, and seem to be within me, which is precisely how a fourth dimensional sound might be supposed to make itself heard."

I purposely made no reply to this, but I sat up a little closer to the fire and peered about me into the darkness. The clouds were massed all over the sky and no trace of moonlight came through. Very still, too, everything was, so that the river and the frogs had things all their own way.

"It has that about it," he went on, "which is utterly out of common experience. It is unknown. Only one thing describes it really: it is a nonhuman sound; I mean a sound outside humanity."

Having rid himself of this indigestible morsel, he lay quiet for a time; but he had so admirably expressed my own feeling that it was a relief to have the thought out, and to have confined it by the limitation of words from dangerous wandering to and fro in the mind.

The solitude of that Danube camping place, can I ever forget it? The feeling of being utterly alone on an empty planet! My thoughts ran incessantly upon cities and the haunts of men. I would have given my soul, as the saying is, for the "feel" of those Bavarian villages we had passed through by the score; for the normal, human commonplaces: peasants drinking beer, tables beneath the trees, hot sunshine, and a ruined castle on the rocks behind the red-roofed church. Even the tourists would have been welcome.

Yet what I felt of dread was no ordinary ghostly fear. It was infinitely greater, stranger, and seemed to arise from some dim ancestral sense of terror more profoundly disturbing than anything

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I had known or dreamed of. We had "strayed," as the Swede put it, into some region or some set of conditions where the risks were great, yet unintelligible to us; where the frontiers of some unknown world lay close about us. It was a spot held by the dwellers in some outer space, a sort of peep hole whence they could spy upon the earth, themselves unseen, a point where the veil between had worn a little thin. As the final result of too long a sojourn here, we should be carried over the border and deprived of what we called "our lives," yet by mental, not physical process. In that sense, as he said, we should be the victims of our adventure—a sacrifice.

It took us in different fashion, each according to the measure of his sensitiveness and powers of resistance. I translated it vaguely into a personification of the mightily disturbed elements, investing them with the horror of a deliberate and malefic purpose, resentful of our audacious intrusion into their breeding place; whereas my friend threw it into the unoriginal form at first of a trespass on some ancient shrine, some place where the old gods still held sway, where the emotional forces of former worshippers still clung, and the ancestral portion of him yielded to the old pagan spell.

At any rate, here was a place unpolluted by men, kept clean by the winds from coarsening human influences, a place where spiritual agencies were within reach and aggressive. Never, before or since, have I been so attacked by indescribable suggestions of a "beyond region," of another scheme of life, another evolution not parallel to the human. And in the end our minds would succumb under the weight of the awful spell, and we should be drawn across the frontier into *their* world.

Small things testified to this amazing influence of the place, and now in the silence round the fire they allowed themselves to be noted by the mind. The very atmosphere had proven itself a magnifying medium to distort every indication; the otter rolling in the current, the hurrying boatman making signs, the shifting willows, one and all had been robbed of its natural character, and revealed in something of its other aspect—as it existed across the border in that other region. And this changed aspect I felt was new not merely to me, but to the race. The whole experience whose verge we touched was unknown to humanity at all. It was a new order of experience, and in the true sense of the word *unearthly*.

"It's the deliberate, calculating purpose that reduces one's courage to zero," the Swede said suddenly, as if he had been actually following my thoughts. "Otherwise, imagination might count for much. But the paddle, the canoe, the lessening food—"

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"Haven't I explained all that once?" I interrupted viciously.

He made other remarks too, as usual, about what he called the "plain determination to provide a victim"; but, having now arranged my thoughts better, I recognized that this was simply the cry of his frightened soul against the knowledge that he was being attacked in a vital part, and that he would be somehow taken or destroyed. The situation called for a courage and calmness of reasoning that neither of us could compass, and I have never before been so clearly conscious of two persons in me—the one that explained everything, and the other that laughed at such foolish explanations, yet was afraid.

Meanwhile, in the pitchy night the fire died down and the woodpile grew small. Neither of us moved to replenish the stock and the darkness consequently came up very close to our faces. A few feet beyond the circle of the firelight it was inky black. Occasionally a stray puff of wind set the willows shivering about us, but apart from this not very welcome sound a deep and depressing silence reigned, broken only by the gurgling of the river and the humming in the air overhead.

We both missed, I think, the shouting company of the winds.

At length, at a moment when a stray puff prolonged itself as though the wind were about to rise again, I reached the point for me of saturation, the point where it was absolutely necessary to find relief in plain speech, or else to betray myself by some hysterical extravagance that must have been far worse in the effect upon both of us. I kicked the fire into a blaze, and turned to my companion abruptly. He looked up with a start.

"I can't disguise it any longer," I said; "I don't like this place, and the darkness and the noises, and the awful feelings I get. There's something here that beats me utterly. I'm in a blue funk, and that's the plain truth. If the other shore was—different, I'd swear I'd be inclined to swim for it!"

The Swede's face turned very white beneath the deep tan of sun and wind. He stared right at me and answered quietly, but his voice betrayed his huge excitement by its unnatural calmness. For the moment at any rate he was the strong man of the two. He was more phlegmatic, for one thing.

"It's not a physical condition we can escape from by running away," he replied in the tone of a doctor diagnosing some grave disease; "we must sit tight and wait. There are forces close here that could kill a herd of elephants in a second as easily as you or I could squash a fly. Our only chance is to keep perfectly still. Our

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insignificance perhaps may save us."

I put a dozen questions into my expression of face, but found no words. It was precisely like listening to an accurate description of a disease whose symptoms had puzzled me.

"I mean that so far, although aware of our disturbing presence, they have not *found* us—not 'located' us, as the Americans say," he went on. "They're blundering about like men hunting for a leak of gas. The paddle and canoe and provisions prove that. I think they *feel* us, but cannot actually see us. We must keep our minds quiet—it's our minds they feel. We must control our thoughts, or it's all up with us."

"Death, you mean?" I stammered, icy with the horror of his suggestion.

"Worse—by far," he said. "Death, according to one's belief, means either annihilation or release from the limitations of the senses, but it involves no change of character. *You* don't suddenly alter just because the body's gone. But this means a radical alteration, a complete change, a total loss of oneself by substitution—far worse than death, and not even annihilation. We happen to have camped in a spot where their region touches ours, where the veil between has worn thin"—horrors! he was using my very own phrase, my actual words—"so that they are aware of our being in their neighborhood."

"But *who* are aware?" I asked.

I forgot the shaking of the willows in the windless calm, the humming overhead, everything except that I was waiting for an answer that I dreaded more than I could possibly explain.

He lowered his voice at once to reply, leaning forward a little over the fire, an indefinable change in his face that made me avoid his eyes and look down upon the ground.

"All my life," he said, "I have been strangely, vividly conscious of another region—not far removed from our own world in one sense, yet wholly different in kind—where great things go on unceasingly, where immense and terrible personalities hurry by, intent on vast purposes compared to which earthly affairs, the rise and fall of nations, the destinies of empires, the fate of armies and continents, are all as dust in the balance; vast purposes, I mean, that deal directly with the soul, and not indirectly with mere expressions of the soul—"

"I suggest just now—" I began, seeking to stop him, feeling as though I was face to face with a madman. But he instantly overbore me with his torrent that had to come.

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"You think," he said, "it is the spirits of the elements, and I thought perhaps it was the old gods. But I tell you now it is—*neither*. These would be comprehensible entities, for they have relations with men, depending upon them for worship or sacrifice, whereas these beings who are now about us have absolutely nothing to do with mankind, and it is mere chance that their space happens just at this spot to touch our own."

The mere conception, which his words somehow made so convincing, as I listened to them there in the dark stillness of that lonely island, set me shaking all over. I found it impossible to control my movements.

"And what do you propose?" I began again.

"A sacrifice, a victim, might save us by distracting them until we could get away," he went on, "just as the wolves stop to devour the dogs and give the sleigh another start. But—I see no chance of any other victim now."

I stared blankly at him. The gleam in his eyes was dreadful. Presently he continued.

"It's the willows, of course. The willows mask the others, but the others are feeling about for us. If we let our minds betray our fear, we're lost, lost utterly." He looked at me with an expression so calm, so determined, so sincere, that I no longer had any doubts as to his sanity. He was as sane as any man ever was. "If we can hold out through the night," he added, "we may get off in the daylight unnoticed, or rather, *undiscovered.*"

"But you really think a sacrifice would—"

That gonglike humming came down very close over our heads as I spoke, but it was my friend's scared face that really stopped my mouth.

"Hush!" he whispered, holding up his hand. "Do not mention them more than you can help. Do not refer to them by name. To name is to reveal; it is the inevitable clue, and our only hope lies in ignoring them, in order that they may ignore us."

"Even in thought?" He was extraordinarily agitated.

"Especially in thought. Our thoughts make spirals in their world. We must keep them out of our *minds* at all costs if possible."

I raked the fire together to prevent the darkness having everything its own way. I never longed for the sun as I longed for it then in the awful blackness of that summer night.

"Were you awake all last night?" he went on suddenly.

"I slept badly a little after dawn," I replied evasively, trying to follow his instructions, which I knew instinctively were true, "but

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the wind, of course—"

"I know. But the wind won't account for all the noises."

"Then you heard it too?"

"The multiplying countless little footsteps I heard," he said, adding, after a moment's hesitation, "and that other sound—"

"You mean above the tent, and the pressing down upon us of something tremendous, gigantic?"

He nodded significantly.

"It was like the beginning of a sort of inner suffocation?" I said.

"Partly, yes. It seemed to me that the weight of the atmosphere had been altered—had increased enormously, so that we should be crushed."

"And *that,*" I went on, determined to have it all out, pointing upwards where the gonglike note hummed ceaselessly, rising and falling like wind. "What do you make of that?"

"It's *their* sound," he whispered gravely. "It's the sound of their world, the humming in their region. The division here is so thin that it leaks through somehow. But, if you listen carefully, you'll find it's not above so much as around us. It's in the willows. It's the willows themselves humming, because here the willows have been made symbols of the forces that are against us."

I could not follow exactly what he meant by this, yet the thought and idea in my mind were beyond question the thought and idea in his. I realized what he realized, only with less power of analysis than his. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him at last about my hallucination of the ascending figures and the moving bushes, when he suddenly thrust his face again close into mine across the firelight and began to speak in a very earnest whisper. He amazed me by his calmness and pluck, his apparent control of the situation. This man I had for years deemed unimaginative, stolid!

"Now listen," he said. "The only thing for us to do is to go on as though nothing had happened, follow our usual habits, go to bed and so forth; pretend we feel nothing and notice nothing. It is a question wholly of the mind, and the less we think about them the better our chance of escape. Above all, don't think, for what you think happens!"

"All right," I managed to reply, simply breathless with his words and the strangeness of it all; "all right, I'll try, but tell me one thing more first. Tell me what you make of those hollows in the ground all about us, those sand funnels?"

"No!" he cried, forgetting to whisper in his excitement. "If you have not guessed I am glad. Don't try to. *They* have put it into my

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mind; try your hardest to prevent their putting it into yours."

He sank his voice again to a whisper before he finished, and I did not press him to explain. There was already just about as much horror in me as I could hold. The conversation came to an end, and we smoked our pipes busily in silence.

Then something happened, something unimportant apparently, as the way is when the nerves are in a very great state of tension, and this small thing for a brief space gave me an entirely different point of view. I chanced to look down at my sand shoe—the sort we used for the canoe—and something to do with the hole at the toe suddenly recalled to me the London shop where I had bought them, the difficulty the man had in fitting me, and other details of uninteresting but practical operation. At once, in its train, followed a wholesome view of the modern skeptical world I was accustomed to move in at home. I thought of roast beef and ale, motor cars, policemen, brass bands, and a dozen other things that proclaimed the soul of ordinariness or utility. The effect was immediate and astonishing even to myself. Psychologically, I suppose, it was simply a sudden and violent reaction after the strain of living in an atmosphere of things that to the normal consciousness must seem impossible and incredible. But, whatever the cause, it momentarily lifted the spell from my heart, and left me for the short space of a minute feeling free and utterly unafraid. I looked up at my friend opposite.

"You damned old pagan!" I cried, laughing aloud in his face. "You imaginative idiot! You superstitious idolator! You—"

I stopped in the middle, seized anew by the old horror. I tried to smother the sound of my voice as something sacrilegious. The Swede, of course, heard it too—that strange cry overhead in the darkness—and that sudden drop in the air as though something had come close.

He had turned ashen white under the tan. He stood bolt upright in front of the fire, still as a rod, staring at me.

"After that," he said in a sort of helpless, frantic way, "we must go! We can't stay now; we must strike camp this very instant and go on—down the river."

He was talking, I saw, quite wildly, his words dictated by abject terror—the terror he had resisted so long, but which had caught him at last.

"In the dark?" I exclaimed, shaking with fear after my hysterical outburst, but now realizing our position better than he did. "Sheer madness! The river's in flood, and we've only got a single paddle.

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Besides, we only go deeper into their country! There's nothing ahead for fifty miles but willows, willows, willows!"

He sat down again in a state of semicollapse. The positions, by one of those kaleidoscopic changes nature loves, were suddenly reversed, and the control of our forces passed over into my hands. His mind at last had reached the point where it was beginning to weaken.

"What on earth possessed you to do such a thing?" he whispered, with the awe of genuine terror in his voice and face.

I crossed round to his side of the fire. I took both his hands in mine, kneeling down beside him, and looking straight into his frightened eyes.

"We'll make one more blaze," I said firmly, "and then turn in for the night. At sunrise we'll be off full speed for Komorn. Now, pull yourself together a bit, and remember your own advice about *not thinking fear!*"

He said no more, and I saw that he would agree and obey. In some measure, too, it was a sort of relief to get up and make an excursion into the darkness for more wood. We kept close together, almost touching, groping among the bushes and along the bank. The humming overhead never ceased, but seemed to me to grow louder as we increased our distance from the fire. It was shivery work.

We were grubbing away in the middle of a thickish clump of willows where some driftwood from a former flood had caught high among the branches, when my body was seized in a grip that made me half drop upon the sand. It was the Swede. He had fallen against me, and was clutching me for support. I heard his breath coming and going in short gasps.

"Look! By my soul!" he whispered, and for the first time in my experience I knew what it was to hear tears of terror in a human voice. He was pointing to the fire, some fifty feet away. I followed the direction of his finger, and I swear my heart missed a beat.

There, in front of the dim glow, something was moving.

I saw it through a veil that hung before my eyes like the gauze dropcurtain used at the back of a theater—hazily a little. It was neither a human figure nor an animal. To me it gave the strange impression of being as large as several animals grouped together, like horses, two or three, moving slowly. The Swede, too, got a similar result, though expressing it differently, for he thought it was shaped and sized like a clump of willow bushes, rounded at the top, and moving all over upon the surface—"coiling upon itself

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like smoke," he said afterwards.

"I watched it settle downwards through the bushes," he sobbed at me. "Look! by God! It's coming this way! Oh, oh!"—he gave a kind of whistling cry. *"They've found us."*

I gave one terrified glance, which just enabled me to see that the shadowy form was swinging towards us through the bushes, and then I collapsed backwards, with a crash into the branches. These failed, of course, to support my weight, so that with the Swede on top of me we fell in a struggling heap upon the sand. I really hardly knew what was happening. I was conscious only of a sort of enveloping sensation of icy fear that plucked the nerves out of their fleshy covering, twisted them this way and that, and replaced them quivering. My eyes were tightly shut; something in my throat choked me; a feeling that my consciousness was expanding, extending out into space, swiftly gave way to another feeling that I was losing it altogether, and about to die.

An acute spasm of pain passed through me, and I was aware that the Swede had hold of me in such a way that he hurt me abominably. It was the way he caught at me in falling.

But it was this pain, he declared afterwards, that saved me; it caused me to *forget them* and think of something else at the very instant when they were about to find me. It concealed my mind from them at the moment of discovery, yet just in time to evade their terrible seizing of me. He himself, he says, actually swooned at the same moment, and that was what saved him.

I only know that at a later time, how long or short is impossible to say, I found myself scrambling up out of the slippery network of willow branches, and saw my companion standing in front of me holding out a hand to assist me. I stared at him in a dazed way, rubbing the arm he had twisted for me. Nothing came to me to say, somehow.

"I lost consciousness for a moment or two," I heard him say. "That's what saved me. It made me stop thinking about them."

"You nearly broke my arm in two," I said, uttering my only connected thought at the moment. A numbness came over me.

"That's what saved *you!"* he replied. "Between us, we've managed to set them off on a false track somewhere. The humming has ceased. It's gone—for the moment, at any rate!"

A wave of hysterical laughter seized me again, and this time spread to my friend too—great healing gusts of shaking laughter that brought a tremendous sense of relief in their train. We made our way back to the fire and put the wood on so that it blazed at

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once. Then we saw that the tent had fallen over and lay in a tangled heap upon the ground.

We picked it up, and during the process tripped more then once and caught our feet in sand.

"It's those sand funnels," exclaimed the Swede, when the tent was up again and the firelight lit up the ground for several yards about us. "And look at the size of them!"

All around the tent and about the fireplace where we had seen the moving shadows there were deep funnel-shaped hollows in the sand, exactly similar to the ones we had already found over the island, only far bigger and deeper, beautifully formed, and wide enough in some instances to admit the whole of my foot and leg.

Neither of us said a word. We both knew that sleep was the safest thing we could do, and to bed we went accordingly without further delay, having first thrown sand on the fire and taken the provision sack and the paddle inside the tent with us. The canoe, too, we propped in such a way at the end of the tent that our feet touched it, and the least motion would disturb and wake us.

In case of emergency, too, we again went to bed in our clothes, ready for a sudden start.

V

It was my firm intention to lie awake all night and watch, but the exhaustion of nerves and body decreed otherwise, and sleep after a while came over me with a welcome blanket of oblivion. The fact that my companion also slept quickened its approach. At first he fidgeted and constantly sat up, asking me if I "heard this" or "heard that." He tossed about on his cork mattress, and said the tent was moving, and the river had risen over the point of the island; but each time I went out to look I returned with the report that all was well, and finally he grew calmer and lay still. Then at length his breathing became regular and I heard unmistakable sounds of snoring—the first and only time in my life when snoring has been a welcome and calming influence.

This, I remember, was the last thought in my mind before dozing off.

A difficulty in breathing woke me, and I found the blanket over my face. But something else besides the blanket was pressing upon me, and my first thought was that my companion had rolled off his mattress on to my own in his sleep. I called to him and sat up, and at the same moment it came to me that the tent was surrounded.

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That sound of multitudinous soft pattering was again audible outside, filling the night with horror.

I called again to him, louder than before. He did not answer, but I missed the sound of his snoring, and also noticed that the flap of the tent door was down. This was the unpardonable sin. I crawled out in the darkness to hook it back securely, and it was then for the first time I realized positively that the Swede was not there. He had gone.

I dashed out in a mad run, seized by a dreadful agitation, and the moment I was out I plunged into a sort of torrent of humming that surrounded me completely and came out of every quarter of the heavens at once. It was that same familiar humming—gone mad. A swarm of great invisible bees might have been about in the air. The sound seemed to thicken the very atmosphere, and I felt that my lungs worked with difficulty.

But my friend was in danger, and I could not hesitate.

The dawn was just about to break, and a faint whitish light spread upwards over the clouds from a thin strip of clear horizon. No wind stirred. I could just make out the bushes and river beyond, and the pale sandy patches. In my excitement I ran frantically to and fro about the island, calling him by name, shouting at the top of my voice the first words that came into my head. But the willows smothered my voice, and the humming muffled it, so that the sound only traveled a few feet round me. I plunged among the bushes, tripping headlong, tumbling over roots, and scraping my face as I tore this way and that among the preventing branches.

Then, quite unexpectedly, I came out upon the island's point and saw a dark figure outlined between the water and the sky. It was the Swede. And already he had one foot in the river. A moment more and he would have taken the plunge.

I threw myself upon him, flinging my arms about his waist and dragging him shorewards with all my strength. Of course he struggled furiously, and using all the most outlandish phrases in his anger about "going *inside to* Them," and "taking the way of the water and the wind," and God only knows what more besides, that I tried in vain to recall afterwards, but which turned me sick with horror and amazement as I listened. But in the end I managed to get him into the comparative safety of the tent, and flung him breathless and cursing upon the mattress, where I held him until the fit had passed.

I think the suddenness with which it all went and he grew calm, coinciding as it did with the equally abrupt cessation of the hum-

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ming and pattering outside—I think this was almost the strangest part of the whole business perhaps. For he just opened his eyes and turned his tired face up to me so that the dawn threw a pale light upon it through the doorway, and said, for all the world just like a frightened child:

"My life, old man—it's my life I owe you. But it's all over now anyhow. They've found a victim in our place!"

Then he dropped back upon his blankets and went to sleep literally under my eyes. He simply collapsed, and began to snore again as healthily as though nothing had happened and he had never tried to offer his own life as a sacrifice by drowning. And when the sunlight woke him three hours later—hours of ceaseless vigil for me—it became so clear to me that he remembered absolutely nothing of what he had attempted to do that I deemed it wise to hold my peace and ask no dangerous questions.

He woke naturally and easily, as I have said, when the sun was already high in a windless hot sky, and he at once got up and set about the preparation of the fire for breakfast. I followed him anxiously at bathing, but he did not attempt to plunge in, merely dipping his head and making some remark about the extra coldness of the water.

"River's falling at last," he said, "and I'm glad of it."

"The humming has stopped, too," I said.

He looked up at me quietly with his normal expression. Evidently he remembered everything except his own attempt at suicide.

"Everything has stopped," he said, "because—"

He hesitated. But I knew some reference to that remark he had made just before he fainted was in his mind, and I was determined to know it.

"Because, 'They've found another victim?' " I said, forcing a little laugh.

"Exactly," he answered, "exactly! I feel as positive of it as though—as though—I feel quite safe again, I mean," he finished.

He began to look curiously about him. The sunlight lay in hot patches on the sand. There was no wind. The willows were motionless. He slowly rose to his feet.

"Come," he said; "I think if we look, we shall find it."

He started off on a run, and I followed him. He kept to the banks, poking with a stick among the sandy bays and caves and little backwaters, myself always close on his heels.

"Ah!" he exclaimed presently, "ah!"

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The tone of his voice somehow brought back to me a vivid sense of the horror of the last twenty-four hours, and I hurried up to join him. He was pointing with his stick at a large black object that lay half in the water and half on the sand. It appeared to be caught by some twisted willow roots so that the river could not sweep it away. A few hours before the spot must have been under water.

"See," he said quietly, "that's what made our escape possible."

And when I peered across his shoulder I saw that his stick rested on the body of a man. He turned it over. It was the corpse of a peasant, and the face was hidden in the sand. Clearly the man had been drowned but a few hours before, and his body must have been swept down upon our island somewhere about the hour of the dawn—at the very time the fit had passed.

"We must give it a decent burial, you know."

"I suppose so," I replied. I shuddered a little in spite of myself, for there was something about the appearance of that poor drowned man that turned me cold.

The Swede glanced up sharply at me, an undecipherable expression on his face, and began clambering down the bank. I followed him more leisurely. The current, I noticed, had torn away much of the clothing from the body, so that the neck and part of the chest lay bare.

Halfway down the bank my companion suddenly stopped and held up his hand in warning; but either my foot slipped, or I had gained too much momentum to bring myself quickly to a halt, for I bumped into him and sent him forward with a sort of leap to save himself. We tumbled together onto the hard sand so that our feet splashed into the water. And, before anything could be done, we had collided a little heavily against the corpse.

The Swede uttered a sharp cry. And I sprang back, as if I had been shot.

At the moment we touched the body there rose from its surface the loud sound of humming—the sound of several hummings—which passed with a vast commotion as of winged things in the air about us and disappeared upwards into the sky, growing fainter and fainter till they finally ceased in the distance. It was exactly as though we had disturbed some living yet invisible creatures at work.

My companion clutched me, and I think I clutched him, but before either of us had time properly to recover from the unexpected shock, we saw that a movement of the current was turning the corpse round so that it became released from the grip of the

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willow roots. A moment later it had turned completely over, the dead face uppermost, staring at the sky. It lay on the edge of the main stream. In another moment it would be swept away.

The Swede started to save it, shouting again something I did not catch about a "proper burial"—and then abruptly dropped upon his knees on the sand and covered his eyes with his hands. I was beside him in an instant.

I saw what he had seen.

For just as the body swung round to the current, the face and the exposed chest turned full towards us, and showed plainly how the skin and flesh were indented with small hollows, beautifully formed, and exactly similar in shape and kind to the sand funnels that we had found all over the island.

"Their mark!" I heard my companion mutter under his breath. "Their awful mark!"

When I turned my eyes again from his ghastly face to the river, the current had done its work, and the body had been swept away into midstream and was already beyond our reach and almost out of sight, turning over and over on the waves like an otter.

SOLUTION TO THE JULY "UNSOLVED":

This problem is quite simple: Since A told the truth and accused one of the others, then B or C must be guilty. Therefore, A is innocent. If everyone changed his accusation, but still accused someone else, B would have told the truth, and since we know that A is innocent, B would have accused C. Therefore, C is guilty.

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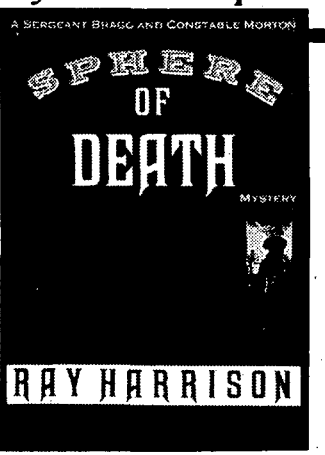
BOOKED & PRINTED

by Carol Harper



He "disliked investigations which turned into a mechanical grind, they dragged police work down to the same level as the crimes themselves." He "refuses to take things just at their face value. He worries away at a problem until he's discovered the real truth. It does not always endear him to the authorities, but he does not seem to mind." These words describe Sergeant Joseph Bragg in Ray Harrison's eight book series featuring Bragg and his assistant, Constable James Everleigh Kerwood Morton.

Bragg is a country boy, son of a Dorset carrier. By 1890, when the series starts, he is a twenty-one-year veteran of the force.

He is known to be an excellent detective, but this puts him at odds with his immediate superiors, Chief Inspector Forbes and Inspector Cotton. Bragg appears to be a favorite of the commissioner of police, who feels that he can be counted upon to solve particularly touchy and sensitive crimes with minimum political backlash.

Bragg, about forty, is a big man, with a slight paunch he attributes to too much ale. He has thick dark hair with only a little gray, a luxurious mustache, no beard. He was widowed at twenty-five when his wife of only a short time died in childbirth. He has lived for fifteen years as a lodger in the Tan House Lane home of the Widow Dora Jenks. He is sometimes attracted to Mrs. Jenks, and frequently lusts after her.

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There are times when he thinks he may be able to get "his leg over," but usually he feels that she is too shrewish to consider as a second wife and contents himself with being a nagged lodger.

James Morton was first assigned as Bragg's assistant when he was promoted to plainclothes after two years in patrol. He appeared in Bragg's office dressed in a "faultlessly cut vicuña frock-coat and immaculate gray-checked trousers [carrying a] silk top-hat and gloves [and a] silver-topped cane." Bragg sent him out to buy something a bit more appropriate, something definitely not Savile Row. And Bragg was *not* impressed. This big, lithe, muscular, clearly athletic young man (about twenty-five at the time) was an aristocrat, rumored to be on the force so he could be groomed to be the next commissioner. Bragg felt put upon.

It is only later that Bragg, after long discussions with Morton while on surveillance in their first case *(The French Ordinary Murder,* 1983; published in the U.S. by Scribners as *Why Kill Arthur Potter?,* 1984; no longer in print), learns that Morton joined the force on a challenge from the commissioner when he mentioned being bored with his idle life. He is apparently not very good at watching from the sidelines. And he has no ambitions to be commissioner.

Morton has brown wavy hair "cut fashionably short and parted in the middle" and is clean shaven. He is the second son (and probable heir) of the Lord Lieutenant of Kent.

He is half-American, his mother being from a wealthy Boston family, and he has often visited the United States on family trips. His residence is in Bishopsgate, on Alderman's Walk, where he maintains a house with his servants, Mr. and Mrs. Chambers. He is a skilled cricketeer and, in addition to playing for Kent, has played on the all-England team. Morton is something of a ladies' man, and is usually successful with one or more young women of less than outstanding morals in each book.

In most of the series, Morton and Bragg investigate as a team, using their connections with the commissioner to bypass many of the restrictions placed upon them by Forbes and Cotton. In *Death of a Dancing Lady* (Scribners, 1985; Berkley, 1988) in which the loss of a ship off the gulf coast of Texas is subject to an investigation by Lloyd's, Morton's American connections pay off. Morton investigates stateside while Bragg carries on the London part of the case. In a few

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books, Morton is assigned to undercover, often without Bragg's knowledge or assistance. He has just come off such an assignment for the Prince of Wales in *A Season for Death* (St. Martin's, 1987; Berkley, 1989), and he is the primary undercover investigator in *Counterfeit of Murder* (St. Martin's, 1990, 224 pp, $17.95). On one occasion, Bragg investigates on his own: in *Harvest of Death* (St. Martin's, 1988; Berkley, 1990), he is sent on leave to recover from wounds received in the beginning of the book. He visits his Dorset cousins and becomes involved in a criminal investigation while recuperating. His capacity in this investigation is unofficial, however, and he is frustrated by the attitude of the local constabulary, who resent the big city copper's interference.

Bragg and Morton have two regular companions in investigation, one official and the other not. The official member of their team is Dr. Burney, professor of pathology at St. Bartholomew's Hospital. A portly and somewhat ghoulish man, it is Dr. Burney who performs autopsies for Morton and Bragg, usually in their presence and almost always to the upset of Morton's stomach. Burney is especially skilled at his work, making accurate judgments as to cause and time of death that would rival the forensics capabilities of modern police.

The unofficial member of the investigative team joined them in the second book of the series *(Death of an Honourable Member,* Scribners, 1985; Berkley, 1988) and becomes a full-fledged amateur sleuth by the fourth *(Deathwatch,* Scribners, 1986; Berkley, 1989). It is in *Counterfeit of Murder,* when she is enlisted as the go-between for Morton and Bragg, that Catherine Marsden actually forms a formal investigative relationship with Bragg, which then continues throughout the series.

Catherine is the independent-minded daughter of a famous London portrait painter. She has broken all rules of proper behavior by obtaining, at the age of twenty, a job as a reporter for the society newspaper, *City Press.* She does not consider herself attractive, but all of London does when her father's portrait of her is placed on public exhibition in *A Season for Death.* She does consider herself intelligent, however, and is trying to make her position on the *City Press* that of an investigative reporter rather than a society columnist. She meets Morton in this capacity and, because of her ability to get inside exclusives from Bragg and Morton, even-

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tually succeeds, becoming a stringer for the *Star* as well.

Catherine is strongly attracted to Morton but is unwilling to give up her independence. Bragg considers them a perfect match and cannot understand why the two don't marry; he is constantly browbeating them about their proper place in society and in marriage to each other. Morton is attracted to Catherine (he bought that portrait in *A Season for Death)* and actually proposes at the conclusion of *Tincture of Death* (St. Martin's, 1989). But *he* cannot understand why Catherine will not give up her job as a reporter. Stalemate —and the proposal is turned down, a major source of depression for Morton throughout *Sphere of Death.*

Harrison has managed to incorporate a great deal of Victorian history into his series, much as have Anne Perry and Peter Lovesey. The names of many prominent persons of the times figure in the stories, as do such specific events as the trade union unrest in 1890, the anarchism movement and assassination attempts in the Europe of 1893-4, and the 1895 report by the Royal Commission on the opium trade. We see the relationships between the City Police and the Metropolitan Police forces; the contrasts between the aristocracy, the rising middle class, the poor, and the criminal classes; and the contrast between city and rural life. We even get to travel abroad—to France and Monaco in *The French Ordinary Murder* (the French Ordinary of the title was a district of London). By pairing Bragg, a member of the working class who has strong feelings about justice and how it should be applied across the board, and Morton, who has led a privileged life and needs to be educated about the real world, Harrison has employed the old instrument of partners of unmatched backgrounds to best advantage. It also gives him a chance to tell us about life in London in the early 1890's (to date, the series runs through June, 1894).

While it is not necessary that the books be read in order, many of the interrelationships of the characters are hinted at as having occurred in previous episodes. The U.S. printing history makes the order of the volumes rather difficult to decipher; the actual order is *The French Ordinary Murder, Death of an Honourable Member, Death of a Dancing Lady, Deathwatch, Counterfeit of Murder, A Season for Death, Harvest of Death, Tincture of Death,* and *Sphere of Death.* Any of these books is a fine introduction to the Victorian police procedural.

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MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller

A dozen years ago, before the world ever heard of Solidarity, the Lenin Shipyards in Gdansk, or Lech Walesa, the Communist Party ruled Poland and the rest of Eastern Europe with an unyielding hand. Even those in power were beholden to the party—mostly for the privileges denied the general public but which they themselves enjoyed. In **Eminent Domain,** filmed in Warsaw and Gdansk, an up-and-coming member of the ruling Politburo discovers just how beholden he is when those privileges are snatched away.

The mustachioed Jozef Burski, played by Donald Sutherland, is number six (perhaps a nod to the highly acclaimed TV series, *The Prisoner)* in the party hierarchy. Early on in the film, we are assured of his growing stature when, in a group photo of Politburo members, the chairman grabs him by the arm to make sure the two are next to each other for the shot. It brings to mind the longtime practice in Kremlinology of studying photos of Soviet leaders watching this or that parade in order to ascertain who's in and who's out, who's rising and who's falling.

To go with his nondescript but top-level job in the government bureaucracy, Burski gets a secretary, a car and driver, and a roomy apartment in a doorman building. His wife, played by Anne Archer, points out that they don't have to wait in line for food. Their simple-minded daughter (Johdi May)

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is afforded the luxury of private school in Switzerland—subsidized by the state, no doubt. Despite these perks, or because of them, Burski must still engage in scratching others' backs. He's constantly exchanging favors with other party officials in a form of barter.

Compared with those he rules, Burski and his little family have it made, but suddenly the film takes a Kafkaesque turn. One day, without warning, Burski's security clearance is revoked, his office is closed, his driver and secretary are gone. No explanation is given. Unexpectedly, he is a nonperson.

His apartment, he discovers, is bugged. Later on, it's ransacked. His wife is told to leave work. Even their daughter is not immune from these bewildering party machinations. She is taken from her Swiss school and returned to her Warsaw home.

Luckily for Comrade Burski, he does have one true friend who offers to help as much as he can. (Considering the ruthlessness with which he was dismissed from official life, it's surprising anyone would stay friends with Burski.)

As far as political thrillers go, *Eminent Domain* is pretty low-key. It's interesting to see inside the workings of a ruling Communist bureaucracy before the Iron Curtain was lifted. But despite the movie's potential for intrigue, it's a one-trick pony. The big and basically only question raised is why has this fairhaired boy been bounced. Since Burski is hardly a sympathetic figure to begin with, it's difficult to care about his sudden troubles. His daughter Eva is used to garner some sympathy; she is somewhat successful in that regard.

Donald Sutherland, playing a good party member, rarely moves a muscle in his face. His bushy mustache covers a mouth which, in this film, rarely smiles. Ann Archer, by contrast, brims with emotion.

The drab setting of then-Iron-Curtain Warsaw calls to mind the cold, hard, inaccessible world of the Cold War, now a receding memory. The image of the constantly gray and drizzly city leaves us wanting desperately to escape it—and the plight of its citizens.

Andrzej Krakowski, co-author of the screenplay, takes some of his story from real life. His Polish citizenship was revoked in 1968, when he was a film student. His father, who had been head of a state film studio, was purged, rehabilitated, and purged again.

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THE STORY THAT WON

Photo by Algimantas Kezys

The March Mysterious Photo-graph contest was won by Lane Olinghouse of Everett, Washington. Honorable mentions go to Owen Mason of Aifault of Noank, Connecticut; ken, South Carolina; Vic DuArt Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia; Mark K. Roberts of Tampa, Kansas; Colorado Butler of Tuba City, Arizona; E. Beachy of Dayton, Ohio; David Grant of Memphis, Tennessee; Catherine Garinger of Dallas, Pennsylvania; Kay Kalabokis of Chicago, Illinois; S. Jean Wright of Kent, Washington; Judith Townsend of Mequon, Wisconsin; Katherine Harding of Benicia, California; and Perry E. Pariseau of Owosso, Michigan.

BYE, BYE, BIRDIE by Lane Olinghouse

"You say this odd-looking bird committed suicide. In your back yard."

"Yes."

"Suicide."

"Yes! Right after he broke our TV set. I watched him. He threw himself onto the trellis spikes in front of our greenhouse. It was terribly messy, blood and feathers all over . . ."

"Tell me—supposing it did so—why would a bird commit suicide? And how did it break your TV set?"

"He flew in the window and knocked it off the stand."

"Flew in the window."

"Yes. My son had come home from school. We were watching *Sesame Street*. Suddenly, a bird flew in the open window, apparently attracted by the creatures on the screen. He flew right against the TV set, knocked it from the stand, then flew out when it hit the floor and broke."

"And he flew to the top of your greenhouse."

"Yes. He obviously was totally grief-stricken. I watched him offer a final prayer to some feathered god above. Then he threw himself onto the spikes."

"To commit suicide."

"Yes."

"Because he broke your TV set."

"No, of course not! He committed suicide because he thought he had killed Big Bird."

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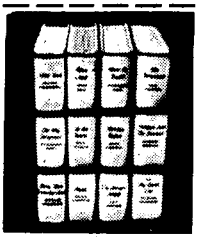

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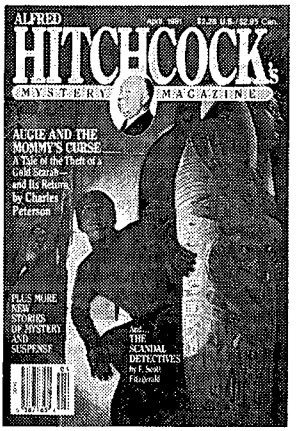
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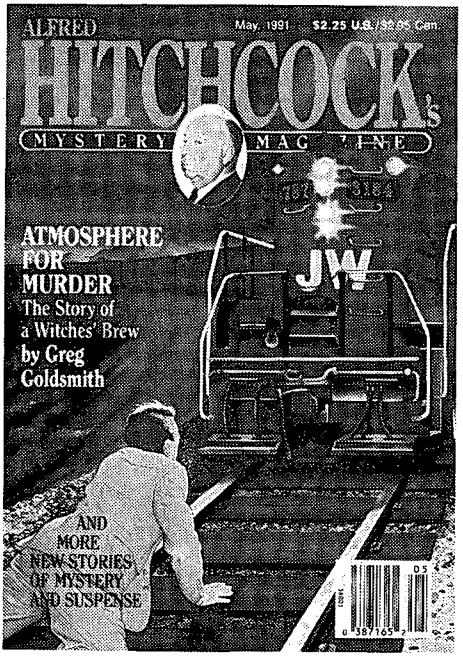

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